

4

Author

Riku Nanano

Illustrator

cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Saving the Kingdom
over Summer Break with
Ladies of Ice and Fire





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Characters



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters/
Brain of the Lady of the Sword

ALLEN

Tina, Ellie, Lynne, and Stella's private tutor possesses an extraordinary command of magic, although he remains oblivious to his talents.



Royal Academy
student council vice president

CAREN

Allen's younger sister by adoption is levelheaded but surprisingly needy. Stella and Felicia are her best friends.



Ducal House of Howard,
northernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms



Duke Howard's
second daughter

TINA HOWARD

After her talents blossomed thanks to Allen's tutoring, this young lady placed first on her Royal Academy entrance exam.



Duke Howard's eldest daughter/
Royal Academy
student council president

STELLA HOWARD

Tina's serious and hardworking elder sister is the heir to the Dukedom of Howard.



Tina's personal maid

ELLIE WALKER

The granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants to the House of Howard, acts as a mediator in Tina and Lynne's frequent spats.



Ducal House of Leinster,
southernmost of the Four Great Dukedoms



Duke Leinster's eldest daughter/
Lady of the Sword

LYDIA LEINSTER

Allen's highborn partner is a loose cannon, but she's also the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman.



Duke Leinster's
second daughter

LYNNE LEINSTER

Lydia's younger sister placed second on her Royal Academy entrance exam. She sees Tina, who placed first, as a rival.

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Prologue

“Your Highness, Lord Richard Lein— I mean, Vice Commander, sir!” A young knight of the royal guard rushed into the abandoned house where I had stationed myself. “All units are in position. We’ve cut off the target’s escape, and we can storm the house as soon as you give the order!”

“Thanks, Ryan,” I replied. “Would you tell them to stand by? And make sure no one forgets their communication orb, but don’t lift the seals until we strike. No changes to the schedule. Maintain sound-dampening spells.”

“Yes, sir!” The young knight withdrew, obviously on edge. He still refused to loosen up, even though I’d told him to call me “Richard” outside of formal occasions. I couldn’t exactly blame him, given that his baronial family owed allegiance to the Ducal House of Leinster, but I could hardly believe that he was the little brother of my sharp-tongued staff officer—a man whom I could practically hear telling me to “just marry into Earl Sykes’s family already and start being a model of meritocracy.”

Believe me; I’d love to, I thought as I opened the shutters a crack and peered out. The cool, early-summer breeze carried a whiff of brine from the Four Heroes Sea. The continent’s largest salt lake was just over the mountain, and its far shore was foreign territory.

Outside, the curtain of night had fallen, and darkness cloaked the mountain village in the northeast of the kingdom. Heavy clouds covered the moon, and there were no lights in the old mansion we were watching either. Its former owner must have hailed from the west, if its distinctive spires were anything to go by. Although hedges bounded the property, it had no walls to speak of.

“We sure got the short end of the stick, didn’t we, Bertrand?” I asked the magnificently bearded man beside me—the most senior knight in Second Company. He was in his prime and wore a cloak over his white armor. “Getting called up to arrest a guy who was one of us until not long ago, I mean—and on suspicion of treason, at that. As far as I know, the kingdom hasn’t had a rebellion since the War of the Dark Lord. And now, the guy who used to be second in line to the throne is plotting to change that.”

“Richard,” he replied, hardening his already stern features, “it doesn’t make sense. They didn’t need to summon us from the royal

capital for this.”

“You’re wondering why the Algrens aren’t doing anything, even though the duke made a point to take charge of Gerard, aren’t you?”

“Do you know?” the seasoned veteran asked gravely. The other knights packed into the room were listening closely to our conversation too—they all had doubts about this mission.

The kingdom’s four ducal houses swore absolute loyalty to the crown. There were a lot of historical reasons for that, including blood ties forged on the enfeoffment of the first dukes.

Our nation bordered the empire in the north and the League of Principalities in the south—both major continental powers—while our western border formed the only point of contact with the domains of the Dark Lord, sworn enemy of all mankind. We couldn’t afford to let our guards down, even in the absence of major human-demon conflicts, so the main force of the Order of Royal Knights had become a fixture of the western frontier—accompanied, of course, by the western nobles under the leadership of the Ducal House of Lebufera.

The situation had naturally inspired the four ducal houses to feel responsible for the defense of the kingdom and its royal family. About a hundred years ago, the northern Ducal House of Howard had trounced the empire in a border dispute and forced them to cede the famously productive agricultural region of Galois, which had since become part of the Howards’ domain. My own House of Leinster, rulers of the south, had gone to war with the League of Principalities thrice in the past two centuries. My grandmother and mother had taken part in the second and third Southern Wars, respectively, and annexed one of the principalities in each. The western forces, meanwhile, had won glory in numerous clashes with the Dark Lord’s armies.

The eastern Ducal House of Algren, on the other hand, shared its overland borders with the friendly Knightdom of the Holy Spirit. Between that and the Four Heroes Sea in the northeast, their house had not been blessed when it came to feats of arms. That fact made them all the more eager to risk their lives in displays of loyalty to the kingdom and the crown. I could count the number of Algren dukes who had died of old age on my fingers. Their house’s failure to act in a matter concerning the royal family was inexplicable.

I sighed, remembering the face of the old man, worn out by illness, with whom I’d had an audience the day before. “The short answer,” I told Bertrand, “is that the old duke is sick. Although he seemed well enough when I saw him at the investiture ceremony for new knights of the royal guard and court sorcerers.”

“Couldn’t his sons take command? I seem to recall them being of age.”

I nodded to the veteran knight. “He has four sons, although I think one of them is still in university.”

“And the old duke still called on us? Even discounting the student, he had other options.” It was as good as a declaration that Duke Algren was at odds with his three older sons.

The mood of the knights in the room darkened. Sending us out here to the fringes of the kingdom hadn’t been part of the initial plan. My caustic staff officer and I had been anxiously fearing an outburst from our commander or my little sister—both of whom were cranky after days of being press-ganged into formal diplomatic ceremonies—when a secret missive had suddenly arrived at the palace. It had been in Duke Algren’s own hand and read: “Prince Gerard in close contact with aristocratic faction. Suspect rebellion. Request immediate dispatch of royal guard.”

It hadn’t been easy to decide who would command the detachment, although given the gravity of the situation, the commander, the staff officer, and I were the only options. After a heated argument, the duty had landed on my shoulders.

“Does the lack of ducal support have anything to do with the court sorcerers’ refusal to join us?” Bertrand asked. He looked tense.

“I can’t prove it,” I said. “Still, envoys from the Principalities of Bazel and Atlas—both bordering Leinster territory—turned up as soon as the imperial ambassador left. Not to mention messengers from the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit to inform us of military exercises along the eastern border. It wouldn’t be the best diplomatic move to have both the royal guard and court sorcerers away either—although my sister and the royals’ personal guards are enough, if you ask me.” I raised my hands in an exaggerated gesture to highlight my plausible excuse, but Bertrand and the other knights remained silent.

The royal guard had once been derided as the weakest order of knights in the kingdom, but the past few years had brought big changes following the experimental implementation of meritocracy at His Majesty’s personal order. Although we had only six companies and were less than three hundred strong, we were now considered the kingdom’s elite forces. And we were even more elite now that Gerard and the other remaining conservatives had been dismissed in the wake of the mess they’d made at the Royal Academy.

But all of us knew just how low the old guard would stoop to protect their vested interests—especially since, as the third sons of prominent houses, they were officially nobles in name alone. They had been kicking up a fuss ever since our current commander had taken up his post. Allen might be the only other person who could appreciate the trouble they’d given me.

“You want to know why the duke’s sons aren’t leading the

response?" I said. "The oldest, Grant, is preparing a major military exercise with Algren troops to match the one the Knights of the Holy Spirit are holding. The second, Greck, is in the royal capital—the Algrens always turn up to greet ambassadors at the head of an army. The third, Gregory, is sickly, and the youngest, Gil, is a university student. It all checks out. Any other questions?"

"No," Bertrand replied, "but I'd like a moment to compose myself before we head into battle."

He withdrew a video orb from his pocket. It displayed an image of...me, being forced to kneel in front of a crowd at the palace maneuvering ground while my house's head maid, Anna, lectured me. I could see my sister and Allen clashing in the background. I tried to snatch it, but his thick arms stopped me.

"What's gotten into you, Richard?" he asked.

"B-Bertrand!" I demanded. "Wh-Who gave you that?!"

"The commander and staff officer, on our way out of the capital. They said I would find it 'soothing.'"

"Excuse me?"

The nearby knights smirked.

N-Not you too! Remind me to share a few stories with your wives when we get back to the capital.

"Attention," I said, changing my tone. Every knight in the room straightened up. "Let's go over this one last time. We're after Gerard Wainwright. He's suspected of treason. He injured his right arm at the Royal Academy and can't swing a sword, but he can still cast spells. Don't let your guards down. Also, according to old Duke Algren, the soldiers guarding him have been withdrawn."

"S-Sir!" Ryan raised his hand, his cheeks flushed. I was pretty sure he was over twenty, but he didn't act it.

"Yes?"

"What if the prince resists?"

"Capture him, but don't do any worse. That shouldn't be difficult—he's just one man. Anything else?"

The knights' lips were set in firm lines.

No worries about morale. Just what I like to see.

"Good!" I barked. "Then let's get moving!"

I was surprised to see that the house where Gerard had been confined was built of wood. One of those strange beastfolk spell formulae must have gone into the building's construction, because it showed no obvious signs of wear and tear despite being easily a hundred years old.

Once we were inside, the other groups started reporting in.

"Second Platoon here. Unable to locate the target."

“Third Platoon here. Not a person in sight!”

“Fourth Platoon, ditto. This place is deserted.”

I paused in my search of the first floor. “The house is empty?” I muttered to myself. “But I know he was here when—”

“Vice Commander!” Bertrand’s hoarse voice bellowed from my communication orb. “He’s underground! There’s a way down through the big clock in the main hall, and it leads to a basement that isn’t on the map we—”

“Bertrand?!” I cried into the orb as his voice broke off. Screams and the sounds of a swordfight struck my ears.

“First and Second Platoons, to the basement!” I immediately commanded. “The rest of you, seal the exits!”

“Yes, sir!”

I raced through the dimly lit house and then down a spiral staircase. All at once, my view expanded, and I found myself in a fairly large cellar. Its walls were hung with swords, which gave off light in place of candlesticks. Ahead of me, more than ten of my knights, their swords and spears at the ready, had formed a battle line and were squaring off against a large man in a gray hooded cloak. Bertrand and several others were wounded and breathing heavily.

Their opponent, on the other hand, was unscathed. He was resting the greatsword in his left hand on his shoulder, and I could see dark-brown hair flecked with gray peeking out from under his hood. He was missing his left eye, which a gruesome scar suggested had been gouged out by a claw, and his right arm below the elbow was covered in a black gauntlet—a prosthetic hand.

The large man suddenly opened his right eye wide and swung his greatsword down, rapidly activating at least a dozen water spells.

Advanced magic!

I instantly swung my sword and cast the advanced fire spell Scorching Sphere at the massive liquid orbs bearing down on me, then raised my blade as I weathered the shock wave from the resulting collision.

“H-He can match the vice commander’s fire spells?” Ryan said, trembling.

Behind the man lay several scattered wooden boxes, and behind them a moss-covered stone double door, one side of which was open. Gerard must have gotten out that way.

A one-eyed, one-armed knight who can take on my men unaided and match me—a direct descendant of the Leinster bloodline—with water spells? There can’t be many of those in the whole—

Then, it hit me.

“Of course,” I said. “It’s you. But why?!”

“That should be obvious.” His voice was deep and somber, and his

gaze piercing as a griffin's. The whole building shook as his mana surged. How was he still this intimidating after so long in retirement?

"It's been too long," I said, pointing my sword at the man. "Sir William Marshal, the Black Knight. I heard you became a recluse after what happened with that black dragon. Now, where have you taken Gerard?"

"A foolish question, Leinster. I may have taken a leave for a time, but my duty is to guard His Royal Highness. I swore on my sword to keep him from harm."

"He's suspected of serious crimes! If you shield him, not even your record will save you!"

"Enough talk!" the former mightiest knight in the kingdom roared. "If you call yourselves knights, let your swords speak for you! Come at me if you dare, whelps!"

This...doesn't look good.

Chapter 1

“Good morning, dear brother. Please have a seat right there. We have something to discuss,” the red-haired girl informed me as soon as I entered the room. She was dressed in a red outfit rather than her school uniform and looked less than pleased—a sentiment that a lock of her bangs echoed.

I complied, seating myself on one of the Leinster mansion’s luxurious couches. “Good morning, Lynne,” I said. “I was startled when Anna turned up at my lodgings and announced that you wanted to see me. Today is Lightday, so our lessons don’t start until the afternoon. Where are Tina and Ellie? I don’t see Stella, Caren, or Felicia either, and I suppose Lydia is still at the palace.”

“Tina and Ellie will arrive in the afternoon. Lady Stella and Caren said that, with the end-of-semester exams coming up in two days, they’ll be helping to prepare the venue for the practical. Emma and the other maids took Felicia out somewhere first thing this morning. My dear sister hasn’t been home in ages. Now, dear brother, aren’t you forgetting something important?”

“I did return your notebook last week, didn’t I?” I asked, confused.

“Oh, yes, you did. Those little wolf cubs you’ve been drawing in the margins lately are simply adorable! How in the world do you manage to— No, that’s not what I mean!”

“The predicted exam questions I assigned you, then?”

“Oh, no, I solved those. I have nothing to fear from Miss First Place with your predictions on my side—nothing whatsoever! I’ll place first this time, and— No, not that either! J-Jeez!” Lynne fumed, flapping her arms and legs. I wondered if she had picked up that reaction from Tina and hoped that the Leinsters’ head maid, Anna, wouldn’t rub off on her too much.

It’s not her notebook or the exam problems. That leaves...

“Hm... What else could— Oh! I-It’s not what you think, Lynne. I’m not playing favorites. I made that collection of wolf cub doodles for a change of pace. It was pure coincidence that I gave it to Ellie after— Hm?”

The red-haired girl was staring daggers at me, her arms crossed and her cheeks puffed up with displeasure. “You’ve just placed yourself under grave suspicion,” she announced. “Tina, Lady Stella, and possibly Caren will join me in questioning you later. You’re

always soft on Ellie!”

“You sound just like—”

“I sound *nothing* like Tina! Or Caren, for that matter!”

“Could you at least spare me a smile?” I ventured.

“You won’t fool me. Your tricks may work on Tina, Ellie, and my dear sister, but *I* am immune!”

“But you have the most ladylike smile of them all,” I argued with all the sincerity I could muster.

The young noblewoman’s eyes widened. “T-Truly?! Wait... Dear brotherrrr!” She made a most amusing face when she noticed my snickering.

“I’m sorry,” I said with a light wave of my hand. “Your smile is lovely, though.”

“Jeez! Dear brother, I... I want nothing more to do with you!” The girl turned her face away from me, although that didn’t stop her from walking over and plopping down onto the couch beside me as she spoke.

Her name was Lynne Leinster, and as the second daughter of Duke Leinster, who held one of the Four Great Dukedoms and governed the south, she was entitled to be styled “Her Highness.” Her elder sister was the albatross around my neck, and both were among the most prominent young ladies in the realm. Lynne was currently enrolled in the Royal Academy, which was among the kingdom’s foremost centers of learning, and she was also my student.

The kingdom I call home has four ducal houses, each of which holds a vast domain in one of the four cardinal directions. Their contributions to founding the kingdom and blood ties to the Royal House of Wainwright had earned all four dukes and their children the style “Highness.”

Lynne is usually such a reasonable girl, I thought as I poked her cheek and marveled at how soft it was.

She spluttered. “Dear brother?”

“I simply can’t recall,” I said. “Would you tell me?”

“You made me a promise,” she muttered, still pouting. “You said that you would do me any one favor before you agreed to tutor Lady Stella.”

“Ah.” I thought back for a moment, then admitted my fault. “I did. Sorry. I should have remembered.”

I was currently engaged as a private tutor to four girls, including Lynne. It had begun with Lady Tina Howard, second daughter of the northern Duke Howard. Ellie Walker, Tina’s personal maid and granddaughter of the Walkers, key supporters of the House of Howard, had also joined in our lessons. And then there was Lady Stella Howard, Tina’s elder sister and the president of the Royal Academy’s

student council, who was my latest student as of just a few days ago.

Lynne was referring to a promise I had made to her as a condition of temporarily giving Stella my undivided attention. "Dear brother," she said, looking up at me, "it's been two whole weeks since then."

"I'm really sorry!" I repeated with a deep bow. It had completely slipped my mind in the rush to prepare for end-of-semester exams! How would I live with myself after such a great blunder?

A giggle interrupted my self-recrimination.

What's this?

I looked up and saw Lynne grinning cheerfully. "Just kidding!" she said. "Did I get you?"

"I'm begging you, Lynne, don't take after Lydia."

"Oh, I think that depends on you, dear brother," she chirped, winking with one index finger pressed to her smiling lips. She was a Leinster through and through. "That said, I wouldn't be...a-averse to holding you to your word."

"All right. But don't ask me to run away with you to the city of water or the Lalannoy Republic, okay?"

"I-I wouldn't do that."

"And no saying something like, 'We're going shopping, and you're carrying the bags. If you drop anything... Tee hee hee.'"

"E-Excuse me?! What have you gotten used to my dear sister doing to you?!"

"Is that not what you had in mind?"

"Of course not! J-Jeez! I wish you wouldn't derail the conversation." The red-haired girl straightened up in her seat, assumed a look of composure, and patted her lap.

"What?" I stared intently at her profile, and her cheeks and ears began to flush red. She patted her lap again. "Lynne?"

"Yes?" she replied. "Go ahead."

"Are you certain that's what you want?"

"I am."

"But, well..."

"Mmm." Lynne's gaze blended unease and expectation. I scratched my cheek, then surveyed the doorway.

We have company. Anna and the other maids must be standing by with video orbs on the other side of that door.

I crooked my index finger, casting multiple layers of perception-blocking spells on the orbs and sound-dampening spells on the room. The shrieks out in the hallway must have been a figment of my imagination.

"Mmm!" Lynne urged me again, apparently tired of waiting.

"Oh, all right." I relented. "Come what may." And with that, I lay down sideways on the couch and rested my head on the red-haired

young noblewoman's lap.

Oh dear. I feel like I really shouldn't be doing this.

A little hand came to rest on my hair and slowly stroked it.

"L-Lynne?" I asked.

"Your hair is so soft, dear brother." She sounded delighted.

I felt a tickle every time her fingers brushed my head. "Lynne, don't you think it's been long eno—"

"No."

"But you see—"

"No," Lynne declared again, peering down at my face with a smile that was so very like her sister's.

Richard's going to have a rough time when he inherits the dukedom.

"What brought this on so suddenly, Lynne?" I asked while the girl did as she pleased with me.

"My dear sister did this with you before, remember?" she replied. "I was jealous."

"Is that all? I wouldn't have thought it was particularly enjoyable."

"It is for me!" She giggled.

"I see."

She was in high spirits. Girls' thoughts were simply beyond my ken.



“Oh, that’s right,” she said. “I almost forgot to mention something important. Dear brother, if I take first place on the exam, w-would you come south to spend summer vacation with—”

The sounds of energetic running in the corridor interrupted Lynne and brought a look of consternation to her face. My head hit the couch as the door flew open without a knock.

“Good morning! I had a bad feeling about something, so I came early! Anna and the other maids were beating their fists on the floor and sobbing that— Lynne? Why are you sitting on the edge of the couch like that?”

In came a girl with a clip and a snow-white ribbon in her faintly blue-tinged platinum hair. She was dressed for early summer in a skirt and short-sleeved blouse. This was Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard—one of my students, and the host of an entity that seemed to be the great spell Frigid Crane. She had been completely incapable of spellcasting only a few months prior, but that hadn’t stopped this young genius from earning a remarkable first place on her Royal Academy entrance exam.

Lynne, having abandoned me, was busy studying a notebook lying on the table. “Isn’t it rather early to make such a racket, Miss First Place?” she asked Tina. “And what about me? I wouldn’t say I’m doing anything out of the ordinary.”

Tina narrowed her eyes and pointed to the notebook.

“What are you getting at?” her red-haired peer asked suspiciously. “My dear brother gave you a notebook as—”

“Why is it facing the wrong way?” Tina pressed. “Are you in the habit of reading upside down, Miss Second Place?”

“W-Well...” Lynne stammered. “Reading this way is good for your brain. Don’t you know that?”

“Oh really? And here I thought you’d told us to come in the afternoon so that you could have our tutor all to yourself—with his head resting in your lap, perhaps.”

“D-Don’t be absurd. I would n-never be so improper as to... I bet that’s just what *you* want to do!”

“Humph! I wouldn’t...” Tina gazed at me bashfully. “S-Sir, what *would* you say if I asked you to do that for me?”

I couldn’t let her down! “Tina, are you really that exhausted from studying for your exams?” I said with a look of remorse. “I suppose I’ve been pushing you too hard.”

Tina fumed. “You’re supposed to say, ‘Would you please?’” she shouted, folding her arms, although she still sat down on the couch between Lynne and me. The girls had never had friends their own age before, and they cared deeply for each other.

"Tina," I said, "where's Ellie?"

"If you're looking for her, she's— Oh, she's here."

A rapid pitter-patter of footfalls announced the entrance of yet another girl, blonde and wearing the uniform of a maid. This was Ellie Walker, Tina's personal maid and the granddaughter of a prominent northern family. The moment she laid eyes on Tina, she stalked over to protest with an adorable expression on her face.

"L-Lady Tina, p-please warn me before you run off like that! Ah!" True to form, she tripped and nearly fell before I swiftly caught her.

"Good morning, Ellie." I greeted the maid in my arms.

"A-Allen, sir. Good morning." She giggled with an angelic smile that swept away my fatigue. I was ready to face the day.

"Ellie..." Tina began.

"Why didn't you just cast a levitation spell on yourself?" Lynne added, finishing the girls' unsparing critique.

"U-Um, well..." Ellie stammered. "I-I can't cast one so suddenly yet."

"Is that so?" the pair responded in unison.

Ellie began to panic. "I-It isn't easy for you either, Lady Tina, Lady Lynne. S-So this is, um, p-perfectly fine!" She looked up at me. "Isn't it, Allen, sir?"

"It is," I said. "But try to watch your step."

"Y-Yessir!" Ellie giggled happily again.

"Sir..." Tina said, echoed by a "Dear brother..." from Lynne. Ice crystals and plumes of flame began to fill the air, so I regretfully relinquished my hold on the maid.

"Have a seat, Ellie," I said. "Since you're all here, there's something I'd like to tell you."

"Y-Yessir."

Tina and Lynne automatically slid apart to make room for Ellie between them. Once she was seated, my students turned their attention to me.

"The Royal Academy's end-of-semester exams start next week," I said. "How time flies. And once those are over..."

"Summer vacation!" the trio enthusiastically exclaimed.

The Royal Academy divided its school year into two semesters, each followed by a long vacation. The system was apparently a holdover from the days when the academy had been open only to the children of nobles holding at least the rank of earl.

"I've asked both dukes and Mr. Walker how many lessons you'll have with me during your two months' vacation," I continued with a nod. "All three replied that they leave that to your and my discretion. I'd like to come to a decision today."

Tina blinked in surprise. "What? Won't we have lessons every

day?"

"Tina," I replied slowly, "be reasonable. Common sense dictates that— Ellie?"

The maid pressed her hands together and smiled like an angel. "I was just thinking how much I'd love to see you every day, Allen, sir."

"Lynne?" I asked.

The red-haired girl blushed slightly despite her look of composure. "Dear brother, let's hold our lessons at the Leinster estates during summer vacation. And...I'd much rather you come south than go nor—"

"No!" the head of her class proclaimed. "We'll spend the whole break on Howard lands! Let's leave for our house in the north as soon as vacation begins! On the very same day! Wouldn't that be the perfect way to avoid the summer heat?!"

"Tina," Lynne replied sullenly, "you interrupted because you knew just what I was going to say, didn't you?"

"You're invited too, Lynne," Tina crowed triumphantly.

"You won't be acting so full of yourself for long. I'm going to take first place on these exams!"

"Y-You will not! I'll defend my title to the last breath!"

"Oh?" Lynne flashed the silver shooting star insignia on her chest at Tina. It was proof that she had placed second on her Royal Academy entrance exams, and it appeared she wore it as a necklace on her days off.

Tina's little body reeled. "Th-That matches Mr. Allen's. I want one too, but then I'll lose first place if... Oh, wh-whatever shall I do?"

Do your best on your exams, of course. I don't see what all the fuss is about.

So, all three of them wanted daily lessons. I bowed my head and said, "I won't be able to tutor you during the start of summer vacation. And I doubt I'll be able to find time to visit either ducal house."

All three girls froze in shock. Tina's and Lynne's bangs drooped, while Ellie appeared equally downcast.

I knelt down to look my students in the eyes. "I know it's a personal matter, but I intend to make a trip home with Caren. I have to tell my parents that I didn't make it into the court sorcerers, after all. I won't be able to tutor you while I'm away, and I don't plan to hold lessons every day regardless—both dukes asked me to ensure that they see their daughters at least once this summer."

"Whaaat?!" all three girls cried in unison.

"Sir!" Tina pleaded, seizing my sleeve. "I want daily lessons once you get back!"

"A-Allen, sir," Ellie echoed her, tugging on my other sleeve.

Lynne, in contrast, remained seated. "Very well, dear brother," she assented. "But may I still see you on days we don't have lessons? I'd like to visit your home to r-relax and maybe even...s-sleep over."

"You're welcome any time," I replied, "although you'll need the dukes' and Lisa's permission to spend the night."

"Truly?!" Lynne was on me in an instant, that lock of her bangs waving delightedly from side to side. "Dear brother!"

"Sir..."

"Allen, sir."

"Tina and Ellie too," I added. "But I'm not certain you'll find my home a fun place to visit."

"We will!" the trio chorused in delight. I didn't know what to make of their reaction.

"I'll need to discuss the exact dates with Caren," I said, surveying my students, "but I expect to leave shortly after the start of summer vacation. I'll keep my stay short—two weeks at the most. I wouldn't want to keep my lovely students waiting."

That last remark provoked a "Lovely? Oh, sir..." from Tina and a flustered "Allen, sir..." from Ellie.

"Dear brother," the red-haired girl interjected, raising her hand with a pensive expression, "may I ask another question?"

"Of course, Lynne."

She appeared earnest, but I recognized the scheming look in her eyes—I had seen it all too often in those of a certain head maid. "If I place first on the exams," she said, "will you do me another favor?"

"All right," I cautiously replied, "but something like spending all my time at the main Leinster estates might prove difficult."

"Thank you very much."

"L-Lynne!" Tina protested, joined by a groan and a "L-Lady Lynne..." from Ellie.

Their red-haired classmate motioned them to silence with her left hand and retreated to a corner of the room. "Join me over here, both of you."

"What for?" Tina asked, nonplussed.

"Lady Lynne?" Ellie added, equally confused.

"Don't ask questions. This is important."

Once the pair joined her, they entered into a whispered conversation. I could only overhear snatches of their secret council, such as "This way, no matter which of us wins, we'll be able to visit..." "Lynne, you're a genius!" and "Wh-What an idea..." but the words I did catch filled me with foreboding.

Once their discussion concluded, the trio sidled up to me.

"Sir!" Tina declared, her fists clenched. "Only making that promise to Lynne is unfair! It's inequality!"

“A-Allen, sir,” Ellie added, “Tady Lina and I would like a chance too. Oh, um...”

Lynne came out in support of the pair. “I agree, dear brother. Competition would be good for me.”

Well, they have a point.

I nodded. “Please keep it within reason.”

“Yay!” The three girls joined hands and began jumping around on the spot. I couldn’t help wondering if their rejoicing was merited, but it did lift my spirits, which had been a little down due to my impending trip home.

“Now, let’s at least decide how many days a week to hold lessons during the rest of summer vacation,” I suggested. “We’ll ask Stella and Caren too once they get here this afternoon. As for Felicia, I doubt we’ll see her before evening.”



“I... I don’t believe it.”

“H-How could he be *that* much better?”

“I...didn’t even get to cast a spell.”

“H-He’s too strong. And way more than just the Lady of the Sword’s sidekick.”

It was Fireday, the start of a new week, and I was standing in the practical testing ground for the Royal Academy’s end-of-semester exams.

“That’s enough,” I said, surveying the students—all first-years—who were kneeling and gasping for breath. “Please leave the arena once you’re finished. Is anyone injured?”

They looked so young in their brand-new summer uniforms as they departed, hanging their heads. The headmaster, who had informed me early that morning that I would be serving as an examiner for the practical whether I liked it or not, had apparently assigned me to the most advanced of the first-years. I wished he would have just overseen them himself.

The students who had already finished their exams were watching from the spectator seats that surrounded the testing ground. I saw second- and third-years, and even teachers, there as well. Video orbs were apparently banned, so they were all jotting down notes and discussing among themselves.

I glanced over at the special testing venue, which stood off to one side, enclosed by massive stone walls and military-grade barriers of every element. It had been separated from the main testing ground for the use of students who demonstrated “a great difference in ability.” That semester, there were eight such students—three first-years, two second-years, and three third-years. The second-years were apparently

members of the student council. As a practical examination of students, it was irregular. Spectating was also forbidden.

I sensed faint traces of mana, and the barriers occasionally groaned under the strain. The girls must have been in the middle of their exam with the headmaster.

“L-Listen here!” he called to me via a wind spell inaudible to the students. “C-Come to my aid at once! Compared to when they enrolled, all three of them have become—” The message cut off abruptly, but I had nothing to worry about; the headmaster was strong.

The last group of students I would be testing appeared—four first-years, all of whom I recognized. The baby-faced boy with dark-brown hair was Fred Harclay, a scion of a renowned eastern noble house. Light flashed off his glasses as soon as he laid eyes on me.

“Mr. Allen! Kindly arm yourself before we begin!” he shouted, prompting a commotion in the audience.

He was followed by Patricia Lockheart, a haughty-looking girl whose family was famed for magical prowess in the west of the kingdom. Her impeccably styled blonde ringlets swayed in the magical breeze she couldn’t quite hold in check.

“Precisely!” she declared, matching her classmate’s tone. “It would be far too risky to face us empty-handed!”

I was at least glad to see them both so full of confidence.

“Now, Mr. Allen!” Fred struck the ground with the butt of his halberd. “Choose your weapon! Sword, spear, staff—it’s all the same to us!”

“Don’t keep us waiting!” Patricia patted the whip at her side. “We can’t begin the exam until you make your choice!”

“But I’ve conducted the exam unarmed thus far,” I said, allowing my eyes to wander from the puffed-up pair to the charming elf girl clutching a staff and the dwarf boy with a two-handed axe standing behind them. “I realize you’re the final group, but it would hardly be fair if I changed that now.”

“That’s not true!” Fred exclaimed. “I mean—yes, it would be fair, sir.”

“That’s right!” Patricia added. “Excluding the Three Little Ladies, we’re the best in our year!”

“And who are they?” I asked, speaking in particular to the dwarf boy, Nori. He was the shortest of the four, but also the most levelheaded.

“It’s a nickname for Howard, Leinster, and Walker,” he replied, fiddling with his curly, reddish-brown hair. “People call them the ‘Little Ladies’ of ice, fire, and wind. It’s not a formal thing, though.”

“Oho,” I replied.

“What are you talking about, Nori?” Fred chimed in.

“Those nicknames were your idea, remember?” Patricia added.

Nori blushed. “Sir, let’s get started,” he said, slinging his massive two-handed axe over one shoulder and preparing to charge.

“And what would you like to do, Nanao?” I asked the nervous elf girl, whose long, pale-green hair glistened in the light. The question seemed to take her by surprise.

“Oh, w-well,” she stammered, “I’d...like whatever everyone else does.”

“Sir,” Nori said, standing in front of Nanao to shield her from view, “try not to bother her too much.” The two of them had apparently known each other a long time, and I thought I detected the bittersweetness of young love. That said, the dwarf boy wasn’t tall enough to actually hide his friend.

“Mr. Allen.”

“Would you please just start the exam?” the human boy and girl in the vanguard urged me.

“Oh, my apologies,” I said. “But I didn’t bring a weapon with me, and I don’t think leaving to borrow one would be proper.”

“We can’t fight if we’re armed and you’re not!” Fred protested. “By my name and the renown of the House of Harclay!”

“I agree with Fred,” Patricia added. “By my name and the honor of the House of Lockheart!”

I was glad to see how much my students had grown, even if I had only taught them for a short time. “You must be good friends,” I said—a remark that earned me startled looks from both children.

“Mr. Allen,” Fred replied, “I can’t agree. What could possibly make you think that I’m on good terms with a ruffian like her? Perish the thought!”

“Wh-Who are you calling a ruffian?” Patricia snapped. “A-And I want nothing to do with a narrow-minded snob like you!”

“Wh-What did you call me?”

“You heard me perfectly well.”

The pair began arguing in full view of the audience and with no regard for me.

“Please, just get it over with,” Nori pleaded from behind them. “I’m begging you.” Nanao was staring happily at him.

Before I knew it, the mana in the arena next door had subsided. “How are things on your end?” I asked the headmaster using a wind spell.

His response was a long time coming. “I’m done for,” he said at last. “I hope you realize that even I can die.”

“You’ll be fine. What does the great Archmage with more than three centuries under his belt have to fear?”

“Well... You may accuse me of putting on airs, but I’m actually not quite as old as—”

“What about the girls?”

“Sir!” a cheerful voice cried before the headmaster had a chance to respond. Tina was seated in the front row of spectators, waving her right hand energetically in my direction—her left was holding her rod. That emotive lock of her bangs was jumping for joy. The nearby students looked from the girl to me as something appeared to click into place for them, although I couldn’t guess what.

Lynne arrived shortly thereafter, her bangs unsurprisingly expressing equal delight.

“Have you no manners, Miss First Place?” she said with a sigh.

“Humph! You were running as hard as I was!”

“I was *not* running.”

“You were too!”

Both girls’ hair was standing on end—their mana and power were even greater than usual.

“Both of you, remember that there’s a time and a place for these things,” I warned them, dispelling their magic with the crook of a finger.

“But she started it!” came two simultaneous replies.

“Where’s Ellie?” I asked.

“Oh, about her...”

“She’s in the other testing ground, nursing Felicia.”

“Felicia?” I repeated. This would be the shy, bespectacled girl’s last exam at the Royal Academy, and she had been excited to watch Caren, Stella, and the younger girls take theirs as well. “Don’t tell me the two of you overdid it.”

“N-Not in the slightest!” Tina protested.

“W-We were the same as ever,” Lynne agreed.

“Then who—”

A blonde angel came to mind.

Not Ellie, surely. How could I suspect her? There must be something wrong with me. Maybe I’m on edge with my trip home so close.

“Well, it’s not important,” I conceded. “I’ll be sure to get the full story later.”

“Ooh! You’re too soft on Ellie, sir!”

“I wish you were that soft on me, dear brother.”

“Did you enjoy your exam?” I asked the girls.

“Yes! We gave it our very best!” they chirped in unison. Their radiant smiles conveyed their sense of accomplishment. A surge of ice, light, and lightning from the arena next door told me that Stella and Caren shared their enthusiasm.

Well then, I’d better not slack off either!

“Master Harclay, Miss Lockheart,” I called to the squabbling first-years.

“What is it?!” came two sharp replies.

“I understand your position on weapons, and I’ll face you on your terms.”

The pair’s eyes widened.

“Tina, Lynne.”

“Sir?”

“Dear brother?”

Both young noblewomen’s eyes were brimming with anticipation.

“Would you lend me your rod and sword?” I asked them.

“Of course!” was their startled response.

Tina and Lynne tossed their cherished rod and sword from the spectator seats without hesitation. I caught the rod in my right hand and then spun in a circle while drawing the sword with my left and knocking the sheath back to the red-haired girl in the audience.

Lynne caught the sheath in her left hand and then hugged it. “Dear brother,” she murmured in a daze, “th-that was spectacular.” Tina hopped up and down with a cheer, while a stir ran through the crowd.

I readied my borrowed weapons and smiled at the four first-years, who were looking tense. “Now, please show me what you’re capable of.”



After the exam, I entered the headmaster’s office to find the old elf stretched out on a sofa. A white cloth half covered his face, and he was breathing heavily.

Light, rapid footfalls on the floor presaged the arrival of a magnificent black-cat familiar, which leapt into my arms. “Whoa there, Anko,” I said. “Now, isn’t there something you can do, Professor?”

“Unfortunately not,” my former teacher replied, lounging in the headmaster’s chair as though he were in his own office. “Honestly, I wish a certain wicked old elf were more considerate. We told him that we’d call after the exams.” He raised his cup, and I caught a whiff of fragrant black tea. “That said, Allen,” he added, “I take it you’ve overdone it again.”

“What do you mean, ‘again’? It’s been business as usual.”

“Oh really? Well, I suppose that is typical by your standards.”

I poured hot water into my own cup, cradling Anko all the while. “So?” I asked. “What left Lord Rodde, the famous Archmage and headmaster of the Royal Academy, in this sorry state?”

“Don’t ask me. He was like this when I got here, and nothing I say

will get a response out of— Ah! C-Could it be? Has he finally breathed his last?”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Young One.” The old elf—whose self-proclaimed three centuries were apparently a bluff—sprang to life, grousing. “You were the one who draped this cloth over my face.”

“Oh?” the professor shot back. “Do you have any proof of that?”

“P-Proof! Wh-Why, of course I...don’t. Nevertheless—”

“Did you hear that, Allen?” my old teacher said. “He’s so quick to blame others. What a waste of longevity. I do have elven friends, you know. I’m well aware that they don’t all spout false accusations or challenge students to combat, trumpeting that they’ll teach their opponents a lesson.”

The headmaster merely growled in response. He had become quite worn down in the course of the day.

I emptied my cup, filled it from the teapot, and, after a moment’s consideration, added sugar. “He fought three consecutive bouts with the academy’s brightest students,” I said. “Can we really blame him for being exhausted?”

“You mustn’t coddle him, Allen,” the professor countered. “You don’t often take sugar in your tea, do you? I picked up treats to go with it, by the way.”

“Thank you very much.” I ignored his remark about the sugar and sat in an unoccupied chair as I munched on a little, seashell-shaped cookie and washed it down with a sip of tea. The hint of sweetness was delightful. “These are lovely. Where did you get them?”

“A food stand I happened upon in the bazaar. From the Southern Isles, or so the proprietor told me. The bakery was based in the Principality of Atlas but relocated to the royal capital after taxes became overwhelming in the past few years.”

“I know I warned you,” the headmaster groaned at me. He was still lying down, and I was startled to notice tear stains on his cheeks. “‘Don’t overdo it,’ I told you!” he railed, jerking up into a sitting position. “So, how do you explain *that*?! Well?!”

“Surely you knew that Tina and Lynne can cast supreme spells,” I said, puzzled.

“Not that! I have more than a few bones to pick with you on that score, but that’s beside the point!” The headmaster glared at me.

I slid the plate of cookies out of Anko’s reach.

“How do you explain the Walker girl?!” the headmaster shouted, continuing his rant. “You could have warned me!”

“Isn’t she amazing? Her progress might be even more rapid than Tina’s or Lynne’s.”

“Really?” The professor interjected with evident interest. “I had no idea Ellie had made such strides. She used to be so withdrawn.”

I nodded, stroking the familiar that had graced my lap with its presence. “She lacks combat experience, but that will come with time. She’s even learned advanced spells.”

“Has she now? Allen, the Walkers might ask you to marry into their family one of these days.”

“Really, Professor, be realistic. This is *the* Walker family we’re talking about. And besides, Ellie is still a child.”

“I doubt anyone else shares your opinion.” The professor looked over at the headmaster and smirked. He fully intended to capitalize on his rival’s mistake.

“Wh-What is that look for, Young One?!” the supposedly venerable elf demanded, visibly shaken.

“Oh, nothing.” My former teacher sighed theatrically. “Returning to the subject of the girls’ exam, indulge me in a bit of speculation—purely hypothetical, of course. The Archmage was wary of supreme spells. He dealt with Blizzard Wolf and Firebird. He was even ready to counter Lynne at close quarters—the thrashings Lydia gave him must have taught him a thing or two about Leinster swordplay.”

The professor’s wicked grin broadened. I wondered if he realized that was what made him so much less popular than he ought to be. The headmaster, meanwhile, appeared to be hiding something.

“But he played right into Their Highnesses’ hands,” the professor gleefully continued. “He stumbled straight into Ellie’s carefully laid advanced spells and traps. And—alas!—the wicked elf went straight to his grave.”

“I am very much alive!” the old elf shouted, unable to contain himself.

“Quiet, Headmaster,” I cautioned him. “I think Anko is sleeping.”

“O-Oh. Pardon me.” The headmaster lowered his head and bit his lip before continuing his protest in a quieter voice. “Listen, young man: you’ve taught them too much in too short a time. If they don’t skip years, I’ll be forced to proctor their exams five more times.”

“What do you think, Allen?” the professor interjected. “Will Tina and her friends skip a year? I believe that would make them the first since you, Lydia, and Her Royal Highness.”

Vigor and dignity returned to the headmaster as hope kindled in his eyes.

I poured myself a second cup of tea and took a sip. “I have no intention of allowing them to skip years,” I replied offhandedly while adding a splash of milk.

The old elf was dumbfounded. “Why not?” he finally asked, his voice hoarse.

I set my cup on its saucer and took a cookie. “I want them to enjoy school life. They’ll find it more difficult to make friends after

they graduate.”

The professor laughed. “You ought to be more social, Allen. Follow my example.”

“In that case, Professor, admit someone else my age to the department.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. Do you really imagine that anyone else in the kingdom rivals you and Lydia?”

“You overestimate me, but thank you.” The praise took me by surprise. His sincerity on such occasions left me unsure how to respond, so I decided to change the subject. “Headmaster,” I said, stroking Anko, “how did Stella and Caren do?”

“They were even more trouble!” the old elf wailed.

“I take it they’re why you asked me to be here?” the professor said to me. “Stella, in particular.”

“They are,” I replied. “Professor, Headmaster, would you take a look at this?”

Both men nodded vigorously, so I projected a spell formula in midair. It was the new supreme ice and light spell I had devised for Stella—Frost-Gleam Hawks.

The professor’s face froze—an uncharacteristic reaction. “Allen...” he groaned.

“The concept isn’t adaptable for general use. Even fewer people are capable of casting it than can master existing supreme spells.” I turned to the headmaster for confirmation. “Was Stella able to make good use of it?”

“She was indeed,” he slowly replied. “Caren began the exam with her Lightning Apotheosis. Stella followed that with three consecutive advanced spells. Then, the two of them launched a joint assault.”

I thought of the diligent noblewoman and the younger sister I was so proud of. They were striving to improve as well.

The headmaster’s handsome face contorted in a grimace before he covered it with his hands. “She’ll require time to perfect it, but...I shudder to think of next semester’s exams.”

The professor, meanwhile, was in ecstasy. “A venerable man like you should consider his age,” he said, goading the old elf. “Even if your incessant ‘three centuries’ spiel is half fanciful, you’re well over two hundred. Perhaps you’ve finally gone senile.”

“I hope you realize you have this to look forward to next year, Young One,” the headmaster retorted. “Haven’t you read their future plans?”

The professor looked puzzled. “I don’t quite follow your— Allen.”

“As one of your pupils,” I declared with a straight face, “I consider singing the praises of my former department to be the least I can do.”

The professor’s eyes widened in shock; then, he slowly began to

chuckle. "You'll have to do better than that! Did you think you could snare me so easily?! Or you, Old One?! Did you forget that I have the right to refuse Stella and Caren enrollment in my department, regardless of their wishes?!"

"I'm in the process of asking Dukes Howard and Leinster to intercede for them," I blithely informed him.

His crazed abuse of power forestalled, the professor reeled. "I-It can't be!" he stammered. "B-But you haven't beaten me yet! Th-There must still be some way to avoid—"

"Fear not, Young One." The tall elf stood and placed a hand on the professor's shoulder.

"Old— No, Lord Rodde. D-Do you mean that you would take my place?" Tears pricked my former teacher's eyes in response to this unexpected gesture from his nemesis.

"Come hell or high water, I shall spectate every test you administer to them."

"I would love to wrench your head off. No god would blame me, and neither would anyone else."

"We've gotten off track," I interrupted, ignoring the farce in favor of the real issue at hand. "I would like your sage advice on what to do with Frost-Gleam Hawks, along with the Azure Sword and Shield."

The carefree atmosphere turned tense. The professor leaned back in his nearby chair, while the headmaster teleported to his own seat.

"Who else has seen them?" the old elf asked me.

"The girls; Gil Algren, my friend from university; and the Howard and Leinster maids. I've also reported it to Duke Walter. Gil advised secrecy, and the duke was of the same opinion."

"A wise decision." The headmaster clenched his right hand, and a map of the continent's western regions appeared in the air. Eight colored lights dotted the chart. The red, blue, brown, green, violet, azure, and black points blinked, while the white one glowed faintly.

"Until just recently, only eight supreme spells existed on the entire continent. This number has remained constant since the War of the Dark Lord. There are four in the kingdom; two in the Yustinian Empire to our north; one in the Lalannoy Republic to the northeast of the empire; and one in the city of water, capital of the League of Principalities. Of those, seven are in actual use."

The white dot in the republic vanished, and a pale blue one appeared in the north of the kingdom.

"The empire and the republic split half a century ago," the headmaster continued, his arms crossed and his voice grave. "The line of a certain imperial marquess, which played a leading role in the founding of the empire, declined as a result. The masters of the supreme light spell are no more, although I believe the formula

survives.”

The professor continued the explanation, offering his insight as one of the kingdom’s finest sorcerers. “The existence of supreme spells and secret arts enables individuals to function as deterrent forces. Many nations already believe that four of them is more than our kingdom’s fair share, even considering that we share our western border with the Dark Lord’s realm. They’ll be even less happy with the addition of a fifth. Allen, this is a serious issue.”

“I understand,” I replied. “I’d like to present them as Stella’s own inventions. Naturally, I believe that the public announcement should wait until after she succeeds to the dukedom.”

That provoked almost simultaneous shouts from my former teachers.

“Young man!”

“Allen!”

“I hope that the two of you will report the matter to His Majesty and to Dukes Lebufera and Algren,” I continued. “Duke Walter has already given his consent, and he will inform the Leinsters.” Gentle calm filled me as I recalled the royal capital at night as we had seen it from the roof of the cathedral. “A new supreme spell and secret art devised by future duchess Stella Howard—it has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

The headmaster and professor were speechless, cradling their heads in their hands.

“What manner of education have you been giving him, Young One?” the old elf said at last. “Does he realize what he’s created?! A new supreme spell and secret art, entirely distinct from existing magic!”

“I beg your pardon, Old One, but Allen is one of your graduates as well,” my former teacher retorted. “It’s hardly fair to lay the blame on me.”

“He attended the academy for one year and the university for three!”

“Ha! Is that all you have to say for yourself?”

The headmaster was in front of the professor in an instant, and the two academics squared off, seizing each other by the collar. I thought to myself that the old elf used his teleportation spells too often as I moved to mediate.

“Will you do it?” I asked.

The pair exchanged glances, then reached an unspoken agreement and released each other.

“Very well, Allen,” the professor said. “We will present the situation to His Majesty and the dukes.”

“Thank you.”

“Tell me, have you considered ennoblement on the basis of your achievements?” The headmaster, who had returned to his seat while I wasn’t looking, sounded as though he had thrown in the towel. “Say, an earldom for the present?”

I shook my head. “Beastfolk chieftains are only equal to barons. Even the chief of the wolf clan, who customarily also speaks for the folk as a whole, is only regarded as a viscount. I don’t consider it proper to outstrip them.”

The headmaster clucked. “Why does that issue have to rear its head now? Young One?”

“I must speak with His Majesty,” the professor replied. “The Lebuferas have also been more strident in their calls to expand beastfolk authority since that incident ten-odd years ago.”

“Let’s settle this matter quickly.”

“Yes, let’s.”

I pitied the conservatives now that the pair were in collusion. That said, any increase to beastfolk authority would be most welcome.

“By the way,” I said, deciding to check up on an ongoing request while I was there, “how is that diary coming along?”

“Tell me, Young One, will you be summering with the Howards again this year?” the headmaster asked the professor, his voice obviously louder than it needed to be.

“Wh-Why, yes,” my former teacher replied. “And will you be returning west, Old One?”

“I will, although I suppose I’ll need to wait until the academy breaks for the summer and the envoys from the principalities and the Knights of the Holy Spirit have departed. The knights’ religiosity is as overbearing as ever. Still, doesn’t it strike you as odd that the League of Principalities is making an issue of the peace terms from the Southern War again after all this time? And both nations’ envoys are officially here to announce military exercises along our borders.”

“Both Liam and the former Duke Leinster are good businessmen. The northern principalities must be suffering economically. As for the knights, perhaps they feared stirring up old Duke Algren’s wrath by conducting such a large exercise without warning.”

“Speaking of the old duke, I hear he’s in poor health. I believe he covertly informed His Majesty that he wishes to appoint a successor soon. And would you believe that the idiot prince still hasn’t learned his lesson? The Leinsters’ boy led a company of guardsmen east, although I don’t know the details.”

“The Algren boys are cause for concern as well. How could they fail to deal with such an *insignificant* matter themselves? And who will inherit the title?”

“The old duke hopes that his fourth son, Gil, will—”

“Excuse me, gentlemen?” I interrupted the interminable conversation, but the renowned sorcerers were still obviously avoiding meeting my gaze. “Haven’t you finished decrypting the diary yet?”

The professor slumped back in his chair dejectedly. “We’ve managed all but a few pages—the final hurdle,” he said. “To be frank, Allen, the risk is too great. I fully expect to find a genuine great spell recorded in it.”

“What more have you learned?” I asked.

“A war—the Continental War—broke out, and the author’s lover fell in battle. Her account becomes crazed after that. She scribbled down what looks like a spell formula”—the professor scowled—“but it was indecipherable.”

“I understand,” I said. “Thank you for your continued support.” I had hoped that they would have finished by summer vacation, but oh well.

“What’s gotten into you, young man?” the old elf asked suspiciously. “You’re usually more insistent.”

“You told me yourself that the being within Tina is ‘the polar opposite of evil,’ Headmaster. That convinced me to stop rushing things. And once the Royal Academy breaks for the summer...I plan to return home as well.”

“That’s a good idea.” The professor nodded while sipping his tea, composed once more. “I’ll need to inform all interested parties of your — *Ahem*. Enjoy your trip.”

“Were you about to say something else, Professor?”

“Not at all. You must have imagined it.”

Anko shot the smirking professor a disgruntled look.

Most suspicious.

“Oh, that reminds me,” the professor continued, ignoring my misgivings. “Lydia is apparently in a foul mood. I’m told that she’s been all smiles at the palace.”

All smiles? That meant danger—*extreme* danger. I ought to lock my doors and windows with care. Still, I wasn’t anxious to leave without seeing her.

“Also, your request has been formally approved.” That remark from the professor lightened my heart considerably.

“Thank you very much,” I said with a bow.

“It’s officially in Her Royal Highness’s name. She wished for it as well, so she made the perfect cover. Of course, there will be hell to pay if the truth ever gets out.”

“Let it be our secret.”

“I quite agree.”

I approached my former teacher and we exchanged a firm handshake. We were in this together!

“His Majesty didn’t know what to think,” the headmaster commented critically, eating two cookies at once. “You stopped Radiant Shield after Gerard sent it on a rampage, and what do you ask for? To officially reassign the Lady of the Sword from the court sorcerers to the princess’s personal guard. Quite the irregularity, considering that the post is normally reserved for members of the long-lived races. The Black Knight is the only other human I can recall being assigned to a member of the royal family in decades.”

“I like to think that it will be for the good of the kingdom,” I replied.

“As do I,” the professor chimed in. “We would do well to give Lydia a free hand.”

Managing the albatross around my neck was nearly impossible. I doubted that her talents would see effective use in the court sorcerers unless she became their leader, but I hoped that our former schoolmate, Her Royal Highness, Princess Cheryl, would be up to the task.

“I see you’ve forgotten something...” the old elf muttered. I responded with a quizzical look. “Even supposing that the Lady of the Sword’s transfer and reassignment are your reward for teaching Blizzard Wolf to Howard’s younger daughter and for that business with Gerard, that still leaves the new supreme spell and secret art unaccounted for.”

“Doesn’t that tussle with the prince cancel it out?” I asked. “The girls and I were held blameless for—”

“Ha! Don’t make me laugh. What do you think, Young One?”

“I fully concur,” the professor replied. “Why not ask to go to work for Lydia? A subordinate role would be harder to object to.”

“Professor,” I said slowly, “I’ve been barred from the palace.”

“Merely a temporary expedient. It will sort itself out.” I disliked the devious look on his face, and the headmaster’s evident agreement was equally unsettling. I resolved never to take after them and to spare no pains in convincing my students to follow suit.

“I really can’t think of anything that I want for—” I began and then stopped myself mid-sentence. “Oh, but there is one thing.”

The old elf nodded sagely. “A faculty position at the Royal Academy? I’ll assign you to the brightest class in every year, effective next semester.”

“Enough of your nonsense, Old One,” the professor interjected. “Allen, if you wish to take charge of my department, just say the word. I’ll embark on a carefree life, traveling between the north and south as I—”

“Keep your fantasies to yourself, Young One. You should be working ten times harder than you are. Slave away like a cart horse.”

The pair were literally at each other's throats again.

"Yes, yes," I said. "That's quite enough squabbling—you'll upset Anko. Now then..."

I soothed the magnificent black-cat familiar glaring up in annoyance from my lap as I told them what I wanted. It would be quite costly and therefore ought to balance the scales nicely. But although I considered my request quite reasonable, the headmaster and professor clutched their heads when they heard it.

"Young man..."

"Allen..."

"I've been so busy these past few weeks that I haven't had time to pick one out," I explained. "And I'm not confident in my eye for aesthetics—Lydia and Caren pick out all my furniture. I'd like a fine one to commemorate the start of Felicia's new life."

"Don't you appreciate your historic achievement?" the headmaster demanded. "No, it doesn't matter. I'll have the choicest specimen in the west delivered by the swiftest wyverns!"

"You disappoint me," the professor countered. "Why order from the west when a selection of the latest and best models is available right here in the royal capital? Allen, I shall pick you out the very finest that the kingdom has to offer."

My former teachers seized each other by the collar for a third time. This was the point at which Tina and Lynne would have started losing control of their mana. I was torn between admiration for the men's restraint and exasperation with their immaturity.

Come to think of it, I haven't heard of the albatross receiving anything for stopping Gerard.

"Well then," I said, with one last glance at the squabbling scholars and one last pet for Anko, "the matter is in your hands. Please let me know once the diary is fully decrypted."



Iceday afternoon marked the start of the weekend, and thus the start of my tutoring sessions, but this was a special occasion. After booking seats on the train, I arrived at the inner courtyard of the Howard residence to find six girls ready and waiting. They were all dressed in their school uniforms and engrossed in friendly conversation.

There had been no sign of the albatross since the little magical bird she had sent that morning, bearing the message "I can't go" in a tone that bordered on hatred. I hoped she was all right; she hadn't even taken advantage of my offer to spend weeknights at my lodgings to make up for my linking mana with Stella, although I recalled hearing something about her transferring that right to my sister. Still,

excepting the three months I had spent in the north tutoring Tina and Ellie, this was the longest we had ever gone without seeing each other.

"Oh, sir!" Tina called out when she noticed me, waving from her seat. "We're over here!"

I bobbed my head to the young Howard maid who had guided me to the inner courtyard. "Best of luck!" she said in passing. "Don't forget that Miss Fosse is lovely too!"

I beg your pardon? Was that meant to be some form of encouragement?

"Sir! Sir!"

"A-Allen, sir!"

"Dear brother. Look."

As I approached, the three younger girls—Tina, Ellie, and Lynne—rushed over to meet me. Each of them handed me her test results in envelopes marked with the seal of the Royal Academy.

"Thank you," I said. "Let's review these over tea."

"Let's!" they replied in perfect unison before leading me by the hand to a roofed table. Temperature-control spells kept it cool in the shade.

Two of the three older girls stood to greet us, while their bespectacled friend seemed to deliberately ignore me.

Hm?

"Mr. Allen!" one of the girls who had risen called, apparently delighted to see me. She wore her long, platinum hair in a braid tied with a sky-blue ribbon, and at her waist hung both a wand and a rapier.

"Good afternoon, Stella," I said. "You must have been quite enthusiastic about your exam. I'm told you even brought the headmaster to tears."

"I w-wouldn't say that," she stammered. "I think Caren deserves most of the credit."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Ooh!" She gave my right arm a light smack in an adorable fit of pique. "Y-You're so mean, Mr. Allen!"

This was Stella Howard. She was Tina's elder sister, the heir to Duke Howard, the president of the Royal Academy's student council...and as of a few days ago, my student.

"I'm innocent, Allen," the wolf-clan girl standing beside her interjected. Her tone was very matter-of-fact, but her silver-gray ears and tail were twitching. "I took my exam in an extremely ordinary manner." The silver wing-and-staff pin that gleamed on her school beret marked her as the Royal Academy student council vice president. This was Caren, my one and only little sister.

“The headmaster told me, with tears in his eyes, that you charged at him while cloaked in a three-element compound spell,” I countered.

“I hear you served as an examiner yourself,” Caren replied. “That being the case, proctoring your own sister’s exam is the least you could— Oh, but I suppose I can’t blame you. You *are* a busy man.”

“But I heard that you worked as hard as you could. Well done.”

Caren gasped as I removed her beret and gently rubbed her head. Her ears twitched, and her tail wagged with glee. Nevertheless, she looked a little glum for some reason.

“Th-That’s enough,” she said, withdrawing her head and resuming her seat. “Thank you.” She then narrowed her eyes and glanced at the three younger girls, who were excitedly removing their own berets. Tina, Ellie, and Lynne sat down as well, all startled.

“Felicia,” I said, attempting to draw the attention of the bespectacled girl with long, pale-chestnut hair. She remained silent but made a show of looking away from me.

I see.

I took an empty seat between the president and vice president. “Stella, Caren, would you show me your report cards too?”

“Here you go,” both girls replied.

“That was fast,” I remarked, grinning at their responses. As I accepted their envelopes, I noticed another land on the table in front of me. Felicia was stealing frequent glances in my direction from her seat beside Caren...and I simply couldn’t contain my laughter.

“Hey! Allen!” Felicia exclaimed. “Y-You just looked at me and started laughing, didn’t you?!”

“No, I would never—”

“Liar!” she shouted, leaping to her feet and waving her arms in vexation. “Caren, your brother is mean! He doesn’t play fair!”

“Felicia,” I said, “the Howard servants are watching...”

“Huh?”

Maids and gardeners at their work were watching with interest from a short distance away. I spotted liveried young menservants as well. No sooner did the bespectacled girl catch sight of them than she let out an adorable squeak and toppled backward into her chair, suddenly unconscious. Ellie saved her from bumping her head with a swift levitation spell—a sight that started Tina, Lynne, and Caren whispering.

The girl who had just fainted was Felicia Fosse, Stella and Caren’s best friend and roommate. She was also a skilled businesswoman who had been managing the burgeoning Fosse Company from behind the scenes despite her extreme shyness—which was especially extreme when men were concerned. But being timid didn’t mean that she wasn’t also courageous; she had voluntarily chosen to leave the

prestigious Royal Academy to join the workforce, meaning this was going to be her last semester there. She would be assisting with a joint business venture established by the Ducal Houses of Howard and Leinster—an endeavor with which I had also been involved until just recently. I reminded myself that I hadn't yet found time to discuss the subject with her father, Fosse Company president Ernest Fosse.

I dripped a little water onto Felicia's forehead, and she started awake with a cry. "Allen..." she said reproachfully.

"I see you're awake," I replied. "Caren, would you fetch me a glass of something from the table?"

"All right." My sister poured some iced black tea from a glass pitcher. I added a dash of milk and sugar, then drank every last drop. It had a delightful fragrance—perhaps of roses, I thought.

Felicia sat up, then leaned forward and planted her hands on the table in a way that emphasized her bosom—presumably not to her knowledge. "Allen," she said, fixing me with a glare, "I'll have you know that I'm already helping with business arrangements."

"S-So I've heard. Anna and Mrs. Walker mentioned as much."

"Why, oh *why* aren't you looking at me?" she demanded. "You must have a guilty conscience!"

"I do not," I replied. "Stella, would you explain?"

"What? M-Me?!" Stella asked.

"I could have asked one of the others, but, well... Just look at them." All of the girls except Stella and Ellie were glaring at Felicia's chest.

The straitlaced student council president whispered something into Felicia's ear, which caused the bespectacled girl to blush red from the neck up. "E-Excuse me?" Felicia stammered. "They're looking at my b-bre— Oh, Ellieeee!" She threw her arms around the maid.

"Y-You're, um, v-very lovely, Miss Fosse," Ellie replied. I suspected that she had missed the mark, but they still made a pleasant scene.

"Please continue," I urged Felicia.

"Well, when I stopped by the office earlier, my desk and chair were gone. Anna was there transferring management to Emma, and they both said, 'Ask Mr. Allen for the particulars! Also, we hear that you had exams, so you'll be taking the day off whether you like it or not!'"

It sounded as though the headmaster's and professor's prized specimens wouldn't arrive until the following week.

I smiled at all the girls except Felicia and said, "Now, let's check your grades."

"Allennnn?" Felicia said, drawing out my name with menacing intensity.

“Don’t worry. You’ll receive a marvelous new office desk and chair next week. But remember: don’t overwork yourself.”

Felicia groaned. “A spare desk and chair are good enough for me. And as for breaks... Ellie! Allen is bullying me!”

“Um, uh, well...” Ellie was struggling for words. “A-Allen, sir, bullying is wrong. B-But *are* you bullying her? H-Hm? L-Lady Tina? L-Lady Lynne? M-Ms. Caren? Why are you all looking at me like that? You’re s-scaring meee!”

The trio reminded me of vicious inquisitors as they surrounded the maid.

“Ellie...” Tina began.

“About levitation spells...” Lynne added.

“It appears you *can* cast them quickly after all,” Caren concluded.

Ellie’s response quickly devolved into incoherent babbling. Stella, meanwhile, frowned—she always had her hands full.

I watched the girls’ antics out of the corner of my eye as I began withdrawing report cards from their envelopes. My free hand reached for my glass, and no sooner had it occurred to me that it was empty than a fair, slender arm from my left scooped it up. Stella kindly poured me fresh, chilled tea, using her magic to add tiny chips of ice to the beverage.

“Here, Mr. Allen,” she said. “Would you like milk and sugar too?”

“Yes, please,” I replied. “But I suppose Duke Walter wouldn’t like me having his successor pour me tea.”

“I’ll shield you from his wrath, should this ever come up.”

“That’s a comfort. I’m in your hands.”

“I won’t let you down.”

I felt closer to Stella than before. I could chalk that up to our two weeks of one-on-one lessons, but the fact that I had taken her to the roof of the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit on the western hill overlooking the capital—a secret even from the albatross—might also have had something to do with it.

“Allen, would you read out the results?” Caren asked, her interrogation of Ellie apparently concluded. Tina and Lynne seated themselves across from me as well, while the maid was on the verge of tears and clinging to Felicia. I couldn’t approve of them bullying an angel.

“Thank you for all the hard work you put into your exams,” I told them, rising to my feet. “I know you’ve all been waiting eagerly for the announcement of the results, which will also be posted on campus next week. Let’s start with the oldest.”

“We’re ready!” Caren, Stella, and Felicia replied, looking tensely at me.

“Congratulations!” I said, clapping. “Caren, you took first place on

both the written and practical exams. And Stella, you placed second on both.”

That revelation earned a smug “Naturally” from Caren and a cheer from Stella.

“Felicia, you placed highly on the written exam too,” I continued. “But... I take it you had a male examiner for the practical?”

The bespectacled girl faltered. “I *am* going to get used to them,” she mumbled. “And unlike you, I don’t lie.”

“I don’t lie either.”

“Liar!” Felicia stuck out her tongue and then reached for a baked treat.

I returned to evaluating the student council president and vice president. “Stella and Caren, you have no real issues—except one.” Both girls gave me questioning looks. “There was nothing wrong with unleashing your full power against the headmaster, but Frost-Gleam Hawks—along with the Azure Sword and Shield—and your use of three-element compound spells ought to remain secret for the time being. I hope that the rest of you will be mindful of that as well.”

“We will!” came the chorus of replies.

“I look forward to the day they become public. I’m certain it’ll come,” I said. “Now for Tina, Ellie, and Lynne.”

“There’s nothing for me to worry about,” Tina murmured, a little nervous. “Victory is mine.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Lynne retorted. She was putting on a strong front, but her voice was likewise tinged with anxiousness.

Ellie chimed in with a quiet, “I d-did my best...” Of the three girls, she was the only one who sounded her usual self.

“Tina...” I said.

“Y-Yes, sir?!”

“Yours can wait. We’ll start with Ellie.”

“What?! S-Sir!” A lock of the young noblewoman’s platinum hair shot upright in protest, while Ellie responded with a loud “Y-Yessir!”

“Miss Ellie Walker,” I announced, kneeling theatrically before the maid, “I’m impressed. You placed third in your year overall.”

Ellie looked shocked, then disbelieving. “D-Did I really?”

“You most certainly did. Well done.”

Ellie sniffed, and tears began to well in her eyes.

“Oh, please don’t cry...” I said.

“I’m c-crying because I’m so happyyy!” she wailed, tears streaming down her face. “M-Ms. Caren, thank you tooooo!”

My sister squealed as the maid embraced her and began sobbing into her chest. “Ellie...” she said hesitantly. “Your efforts really paid off.” I was glad to see that they had taken to each other so well.

Now...

“Tina, Lynne,” I said, “thank you for waiting. You placed first and second.”

“Y-Yes?!” the pair demanded expectantly.

“I’ll start with the written exam. First place goes to...”

Both girls had their hands clasped in heartfelt prayer, while their bangs were locked in conflict. Tina was repeating “Don’t worry. Don’t worry. Don’t worry...” while Lynne chanted “Me. Me. Me...”

“Lady Tina Howard!” I announced.

The platinum-haired girl said not a word, but she clenched her right fist. Lynne was grinding her teeth. Meanwhile, the four girls who had already been told their results had resumed their friendly chitchat. The difference in intensity was shocking.

“Next, the practical,” I said.

“Both. Both. Both...”

“I’ve got this. I’ve got this. I’ve got this...”

“Lady Lynne Leinster!”

The red-haired girl said not a word, but she clenched her left fist. Tina was biting her lip. Meanwhile, the older girls were busy discussing a café they had stopped by after school. I was so glad that Stella had finally gotten to go to one.

“And so,” I continued, “overall first place goes to...”

“I’m number one!” both girls shouted in unison.

“Lady Tina Howard!”

“Yesss!” Tina exclaimed as she jumped for joy. Lynne just groaned in frustration and started chewing on her lip.

“L-Lady Tina, L-Lady Lynne,” Ellie stammered, panicking.

“That said...” I continued with a smile. This provoked startled stares from everyone but Caren, who gave me a look that showed she had (unsurprisingly) guessed what was coming. “Ellie is number one this time.”

“What?!” Tina and Lynne exclaimed, both frozen in shock.

“U-Um... A-Allen, sir?” Ellie asked hesitantly.

“It was a tough choice between you and Stella,” I said. “Still, considering how far your grades have come since you enrolled, you’re the clear leader. Well done. I’m delighted for you.”

“Oh, well...” Ellie giggled. “Thank you so much.”

The blonde maid removed her beret and came to stand in front of me. I shot Caren a questioning look, and she signaled her approval—proving what softies we both were.

Ellie continued to giggle as I gently rubbed her head. “I’m going to keep trying my best,” she declared.

“I’m sure you will,” I replied. “That said...” I stopped rubbing her head and gently pinched her cheek, eliciting a confused yelp from the young maid. “Don’t overdo it. Who will put the brakes on Tina and

Lynne if you become as uncontrollable as they are?"

At the end of my last meeting with the headmaster, he had insisted that I give Ellie a talking-to. He loved to blow things out of proportion.

"Uncontrollable,' sir?" Tina asked pointedly.

"Whoever do you mean, dear brother?" Lynne echoed. Both young noblewomen seemed pleased that I was cautioning Ellie.

"I won't," the maid promised, "but couldn't you rein them in yourself?"

I paused for a moment before choosing to ignore that last remark. "In any case, please try to be considerate of Lord Rodde. That goes for you too, Caren! And you, Stella!"

"Make that just Stella," my sister replied.

"Caren, how could you?" Stella complained.

What am I to do with Caren and my students? I wondered. And what is it now, Felicia? It's all my fault if you really think about it, you say?

What am I to do with this future tycoon?

The blonde maid tugged on my left sleeve. "A-Allen, sir."

"Hm? What is it, Ellie?" I asked.

"U-Um... You p-promised," the angel said, fidgeting. This would normally be Tina and Lynne's cue to lose their tempers, but they kept cool and continued drinking tea and snacking on baked goods in silence.

Oh, Felicia. You shouldn't eat so many.

"Promised what?" Stella wondered aloud; then, her eyes widened in apparent realization. Caren appeared to be contrastingly calm at first glance, but her tail betrayed her vexation.

"I did, didn't I?" I said, smiling at Ellie. "So, what would you like? I'll do my best to comply."

"Um, well..." Ellie hesitated. "T-To go with you to visit your family. And for Lady Tina and Lady Lynne to come too. Y-You haven't done me the favor you promised when you agreed to tutor Stady Lella either. Oh, um..."

"I see..."

So, this was what the girls had been scheming! They must have agreed to wish for the same thing, no matter which of them placed first. Well, it *was* true that I had made Tina and Ellie that promise about tutoring Stella too.

The president of the Royal Academy's student council stepped in to chide the girls. "Ellie," she said. "And you two as well, Tina and Lynne. Do you realize where you stand when it comes to—"

The trio immediately raced to Caren's side. "Please, Ms. Caren! We want to go with you!" They pleaded with their hands clasped, and there were tears forming in their upturned eyes.

Caren appeared to struggle for a moment but eventually relented. “V-Very well,” she said. “A promise is a promise. But you’ll need your parents’ permission to—”

“We’ve got it already!” the trio shouted at once.

“You heard them, Allen,” Caren said. She was such a pushover. In fact, she had been doting on the younger girls ever since I enlisted her to help tutor them.

“Mr. Allen,” said the smiling student council president to my left. I shivered as a chill ran down my spine and my skin broke out in goosebumps; she was ordinarily a saint, but now she terrified me.

“S-Stella,” I replied.

I used my eyes to beg Caren and Felicia for immediate aid, but it seemed that I could expect no reinforcements! My sister was indulging her maternal instincts by praising the trio: “You worked very hard. I’m impressed.” Meanwhile, the bespectacled girl was muttering in a daze: “Me too. But then, the company... But...”

The student council president adopted a sullen look, rested her hands in her lap, and began to grumble. “It’s not fair. You didn’t say a word to me. I wish you’d told me straight away.”



“I d-don’t think I had much choice in the matter,” I replied.

“I don’t want excuses, Mr. Allen! I’ll join you on—”

“The answer is no. I trust you know why.”

She pummeled my chest in response.

“Duke Walter can hardly wait to see you,” I said, taking her gently by the hands. “Please go home.”

Stella cast her gaze downward in a moment of consideration and then murmured, “I’m not happy about it, but all right. I won’t hesitate to use force next time!”

“Please, Stella,” I pleaded. “Don’t follow in her footsteps.”

“I can’t promise that. After all”—the saint’s voice dropped to an inaudible whisper—“I want to get as close to what you like as I can.”

“Stella?” I asked, confused by her abrupt silence.

“N-Nothing! Now, I think it’s time we finalized our plans.”

“I suppose so.”

I snapped my fingers and projected a map of the continent, thinking that it might be an aid to explanations. Tina, Ellie, and Lynne gaped at it, their eyes wide.

“Allen, you made it too big,” Caren informed me.

“Did I?” I asked. “I like including the North Imperial Sea and the island nations of the Holy South Sea.”

“They’re unnecessary. Trim it down to a map of the kingdom.”

“Oh, all right.” I relented with a heavy heart and changed my map to show only our home country. The younger girls’ eyes shone even brighter, while Felicia—ever diligent—grew pensive and mused aloud about whether this trick had business applications.

I returned my attention to the map and pointed to its center. “Let’s go over our plans for summer vacation,” I said. “Felicia, you’ll be remaining in the royal capital.”

“Oh, yes,” she confirmed. “I will.”

“I’m told that Anna will be returning to the south, while Mrs. Walker will be going north with Stella. If any issues arise—”

“I’ll turn to Emma and the other remaining Leinster and Howard maids for help!”

“Good,” I said. “Tina, Ellie, Lynne.”

“Yes?” the trio replied.

“You’ll be traveling to the eastern capital with Caren and me. We plan to stay ten days, so pack accordingly.”

They responded with a cheerful chorus of “We will!”

“Allen,” Caren hesitantly interjected.

“Hm? Yes?” I asked.

“Will Lydia be, um...”

“I can’t say what her plans are, especially since she’s been

officially assigned to guard Her Royal Highness.”

The girls all leapt to their feet in surprise—all except my sister, who pressed a hand to her forehead and muttered, “*Again*, Allen?” I didn’t quite follow. Had I neglected to tell them? And what was Caren talking about? I hadn’t done a thing.

I clapped my hands together and said, “Get ready for your trips, everyone. And Felicia, please take good care of yourself while we’re away.”



I was spending the afternoon in my lodgings, packing for my journey. The week had only just begun, but the Royal Academy would soon be marking the end of its first semester. Bulky changes of clothes and some heavy books I planned to read were already en route east via griffin; all that remained were the books I wanted to carry with me, some notebooks and writing implements, and souvenirs for my parents.

The little bird that I’d sent that day bearing a message to Lydia had yet to return with her response. We had been exchanging daily communications in the morning and evening, although I wondered if that was often enough; I did feel somewhat lonesome.

A warm impact cut my musings short, and familiar, dainty hands appeared in front of me. “Whoa there,” I said. “Lydia, I wish you wouldn’t surprise me like that.”

“Shut up!” she snapped. “I need quiet. I’m in the middle of an emergency resupply.”

“A resupply of what?”

The beauty with gorgeous scarlet tresses who had just stealthily seized hold of me and was now pressing her face into my back was Lydia Leinster, also known as the Lady of the Sword. She was the eldest daughter of Duke Leinster, and her swordplay and sorcery were among the finest in the kingdom. In defiance of long-standing tradition, she had just been reassigned from the court sorcerers to the first princess’s personal guard—an occasion for which she must have commissioned the unfamiliar scarlet knight’s uniform she wore. She was also the albatross around my neck.

“I’m in the middle of packing for my trip home,” I said. “Would you please let go?”

“No!”

“You’re making it hard to move.”

“No!” she repeated. It seemed that she was determined to maintain her hold on me.

Oh well.

I attempted to resume what I was doing nonetheless, but she

tugged on the hem of my shirt. "Yes?" I asked.

"Come here," she replied.

What did she mean?

"Just do it!"

A cry escaped me as I was suddenly yanked down onto the bed. Before I even had a chance to protest, Lydia was hugging me. Her upturned eyes were fixed on me, but all she said was "Mmm..."

Forget what I said—her mental fatigue was at record levels. I doubted it had been this bad since the Hero had defeated her so soundly during their first encounter. I gave in and started gently stroking her head and back. She squirmed as though my touch tickled and even began to hum contentedly, but she never relaxed her grip.

A little while later, the young woman in my arms murmured, "I'm going to the eastern capital too." Her soft voice concealed steely determination.

"I wouldn't object," I replied. "But what about your guard duty?"

"I've already gotten permission."

"I don't beli— Ow!" I was cut off as Lydia bit me playfully through my clothes, right around the collarbone. It was a sure sign that she was displeased.

"Hmph! What kind of servant doesn't believe what his mistress tells him?!" Despite her complaints, she was moving her head against my hand in a demand for more rubbing.

"That permission couldn't have been easy to get," I remarked.

"You must have heard something about what happened," she replied with reluctance. "That brainless prince is at it again, and he gave my stupid brother the slip."

"I had heard that he went east, but not that he'd escaped. Richard failed to capture Gerard?"

Lydia's elder brother, Richard Leinster, was the vice commander of the knights of the royal guard. Although he had not mastered the supreme fire spell Firebird and the secret Scarlet Sword, the symbols of his ducal house, he remained quite a capable fighter. Gerard had once been the eighth strongest member of the guard, but he had injured his right arm during his outrage at the Royal Academy—a wound that had brought his life as a knight to an end, according to some very reliable sources. Arresting him should have been easy.

I considered things for a moment. "The main forces of the royal guard and court sorcerers can't leave while the envoys from the principalities and the messengers from the Knights of the Holy Spirit are visiting. The Lady of the Sword, on the other hand, is newly transferred and easy to dispatch. I take it you're Richard's emergency replacement?"

Lydia scowled unhappily at me. "Will I be on my own?"

“Yup. You’ll be all— Hey! That hurts! No biting!”

“You mean, stupid dummy...” she grumbled. “Here’s one more for good measure.” She sank her teeth into my collarbone again.

This looks like a perfect opportunity for another—

“If you even *try* to play dumb, I’ll get you in the neck,” Lydia said, opening her mouth to bare her sharp, gleaming canines. She meant every word.

“Since when are you a vampire?!” I exclaimed, hugging her to me. I then whispered in her ear, “I’ll be with you when you need me, as always.”

“You should have said so in the first place.” Her aggrieved tone contained a hint of sweetness, and she buried her face in my chest.

Some time later, she appeared to have recovered and asked me to sit on the edge of the bed. I obliged, and she demanded that I sit farther back. Once she was satisfied, she seated herself on my lap, dragged my arms around her, and then hugged herself as well.



“Tell me,” she said.

“Tell you what?”

“You used your reward to have me transferred, didn’t you? And not once but twice.”

How had she found out?

“W-Well,” I said, “I really must get back to packing for my— Lydia.”

“Mmh?” came her muffled reply.

“Please don’t bite my arms. How many parts of me are you trying to leave marks on?”

“Huh? All of you, if you’ll let me. Why?”

I heaved the albatross onto the bed and returned to my preparations.

“H-Hey! Get back here!” Lydia called after me. She then proceeded to flop back onto the bed, hug my pillow, and mutter something under her breath. “Why do you always get your requests granted? I can’t even get admission to the royal archives—Gerhard Gardner and his stupid nobles keep objecting. Someday I’ll slice them up, incinerate them, and then slice them up again.”

Oh, honestly.

No sooner had I turned to look at her than she bolted upright, pointed her finger at me, and triumphantly proclaimed: “I’m taking off every afternoon this week, so be ready to go shopping, dining, and a whole lot else!”

I finished packing, closed my trunk, and stood up. “I think I’ll go shopping for dinner,” I said. “I’ll walk with you until we get close to the palace.”

“Dummy...” the albatross groused, although she wasted no time leaving the bed, wrapping her arms around me, and clasping my hand. I felt a weight on my shoulder as she asked, “Would you send birds more often?”

“Yes, yes,” I replied. “We’ll make it morning, noon, and night from now on.”

“Only one ‘yes!’” Lydia snapped. “And don’t pretend you weren’t thinking the same thing.”

We did think alike—not that I would admit it.

After a moment, she murmured, “I’ll sleep here the night before our train leaves.”

“What will you do for luggage?”

“Do you need to ask? That’s what we’re going shopping for—just the two of us.” She flashed me her usual radiant smile. I wouldn’t want her any other way.

“By the way,” she added, “Felicia has some ideas for what to call

the new joint company.”

“Why did she bring them to you?” I asked, confused. “And does it really need a fancy name?”

“Emma made a special trip to the palace to ask for my blessing. And I gave it.”

Was Felicia planning to name the business after Lydia? “The Lady of the Sword & Co.,” perhaps? But wouldn’t that upset the Howards? Well, it made little difference to me if she made the noblewoman beside me even more of a celebrity.

“It sounds as though you have your fair share of problems too,” I said.

“Why do you think highly of everyone but yourself, dummy?” Lydia muttered in response, although she spoke too quietly for me to hear.

“Is something the matter?”

“Nothing that concerns you,” she replied. “Let’s stop for some of those ice sweets on the way! The ones they sell by the fountain plaza!”

“Good idea. Those are deli— Um, Your Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster?” The albatross’s scarlet hair shone with a tremendous pulse of mana.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Why, pray tell, are you weaving a Firebird while holding my hand...?”

“We’ve never been there together, have we? So how do you know how delicious those desserts are?”

“O-Of course we have,” I hurriedly replied, avoiding her gaze.

“Are you sure you haven’t just forgotten?”

“I remember everywhere I’ve ever been with you.”

Spoken without a moment’s hesitation. Well, to be fair, I might remember most of them too.

“All right,” I said, raising my free left hand in surrender. “I’ll treat you to whatever you like.”

“I’ll eat yours too. And I get to pick the flavors.”

“Y-You’re inhuman.”

“I am not!” the noblewoman whined, sounding very much like a child. She hadn’t changed since the day we’d met.

The thought must have relaxed me, because, without meaning to, I let my head loll and come to rest against hers. Immediately, her arm shot up, and she began gently stroking my hair. “Don’t worry,” she said. “You’re not alone. You’ve got me. So everything’s going to be fine.”

“I know,” I eventually replied. “Thank you.” I was grateful for her reassuring presence at times like this. I was just a tiny bit frightened of reuniting with my mom and dad.

Chapter 2

The scenery that came into view at the end of the long tunnel was...a dense expanse of green.

The girls—dressed in their everyday clothes—exclaimed in delight as the train wove its way through verdant forests and over numerous gorges. All this scenery was fresh and surprising to them, although I found it comfortingly familiar.

An entire year had passed since I was last here, but the feeling of déjà vu was unmistakable. Perhaps it was because I had ridden another train just several months earlier. I had been alone at the time and, in retrospect, desperate in the wake of my rejection from the court sorcerers. And now I was a private tutor. One never knew what life would bring—this latest revelation included.

“Sir,” Tina said, “are you still feeling down?”

Ellie smiled at me encouragingly. “I th-think your name is lovely, Allen, sir.”

“I believe it was a magnificent choice, dear brother,” Lynne chimed in.

“Please don’t rub it in,” I pleaded. “You might make me weep.”

The girls were sitting across from me in a deluxe car befitting their stations. Anna and Mrs. Walker had taken it upon themselves to change the reservation I had made for myself. I wouldn’t tell anyone about the lecture that the two of them had given me before our departure.

As we had said our farewells at Central Station in the royal capital, Felicia had handed me a paper which now lay on the table. The document, bearing the signatures of Duke Walter Howard, Duke Liam Leinster, and Duchess Lisa Leinster, officially named the ducal houses’ joint business venture: Allen & Co.

Why? How could this happen?

Emma and Felicia had gloated over my dismal reaction when they saw me off. “You have only yourself to blame,” the bespectacled young woman had said. “Thank you for the office desk and chair. And next year, I’ll come hang out with your family too! Come hell or high water!”

She was far too driven, even when she didn’t need to be!

“You brought it on yourself, Allen,” Caren remarked calmly from the seat beside me. She had her arms folded and wore the same shorts

and shirt that I had once seen Stella in, albeit in different colors. Even their berets matched.

“Caren,” I said, “I need kindness and comfort from my sister right now.”

“It’s water under the bridge,” she replied. “Get over it.”

“Ellie, my mean little sister is being a bully. Won’t you console me?”

“Y-Yessir!” the maid replied. “I’m, um, well, o-on your side.”

Hearing her angelic words brought tears to my eyes, and as I gazed at her, I couldn’t help but think that the long, bright-green skirt she was wearing in lieu of her uniform became her wonderfully.

“Dear brother, the eastern capital was once the center of an ancient empire, wasn’t it?” Lynne interjected. Her red-and-white outfit was chosen for freedom of movement.

“That’s right,” I replied. “Shall I use a map to illustrate? It would make for a good lesson in history and geography.”

I conjured a map of the continent—newly improved to change color based on element—in the center of the car, where the girls and Caren could see it.

“The history of the kingdom where we live stretches back to the ancient past, even before the Continental War five hundred years ago,” I explained. “That said, the city of water, at the heart of the League of Principalities to the south of the Duchy of Leinster, is even older. Tina, can you tell me what the large nation north of the Duchy of Howard is called?”

“The empire,” the young noblewoman across from and to the right of me answered. “The Yustinian Empire, to be precise.”

“That’s right. Now, Ellie, we’re heading to the east of the kingdom. Can you tell me what country it touches?”

“Y-Yessir!” the maid replied. “It’s, uh, um...the land that the Knights of the Holy Spirit govern.”

“Exactly. Now, we’ve mentioned the kingdom, the city of water—or rather, the league, which consists of the city and eleven principalities—the empire, and the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit.”

I changed the colors of the map as I spoke, using black to highlight most of the east of the kingdom, as well as the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit, the empire to the north, and the Lalannoy Republic to the northeast of the empire. I then added a point to mark the eastern capital.

“An ancient empire once ruled all the vast territories in black on this map,” I continued. “Its capital, which stood where our eastern capital is now, was called the divine city of Alrion. While the ancient empire was great”—the black area fractured into more than ten pieces, forming an ancient map—“it broke apart and dissolved five

centuries ago, during the Continental War. The divine city of Alrion—the current eastern capital—was supposedly reduced almost entirely to ash by the great spell Blazing Qilin. The details are recounted in the story *The Empire and the Countess*, which Tina once told me. Now, let's return to the present day."

The black fragments faded one by one as I transformed the map, until only the present northern empire remained. The sudden rise of the Lalannoy Republic—famed for its advanced magical engineering—in the empire's northeast was one eye-catching change. The union of the small island nations in the Holy South Sea into the Covenant of Southern Isles was another. The Knightdom of the Holy Spirit and the patchwork of small countries even farther east remained unchanged. The pontiff's domain, the heart of the Church of the Holy Spirit, was the sole exception; it expanded slightly, courtesy of donations.

The kingdom's influence expanded in all directions over the centuries. At one point, its western edge even stretched beyond the Blood River—the largest river on the continent and our current border—to encompass what the Church of the Holy Spirit held to be sacred ground.

"And that is how our homeland came to have its present shape," I said, switching back to an enlarged map of the kingdom. "And the Four Great Dukedoms—Howard in the north, Algren in the east, Leinster in the south, and Lebufera in the west—have long defended it."

Just before we had boarded the train at Central Station, I had spotted Gil Algren, Duke Algren's fourth son and my former university underclassman, along with his maid and bodyguard Konoha. Neither one had noticed me; they had been too engaged in a serious conversation with a tall old man of knightly bearing, his hair and beard both gray. I supposed that Gil was returning to the eastern capital as well, given that he had been dressed for travel, but he would presumably be too busy to see me there.

"That was a basic overview," I said. "Did you have any trouble understanding it?"

The trio responded in the negative. I could feel the sight of their smiling faces healing my wounded heart.

"Sir! Sir!" Tina whispered. She was wearing an outfit of white and pale azure that emphasized her neat primness.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Well, you see..." She faltered, then turned to look at Ellie.

"Um, well..." the maid continued, also whispering and fidgeting with her fingers. "It's about Ms. Lydia."

"What about her?" I asked, confused.

Ellie shifted her gaze to Lynne, who took up the whispered

conversation. "Doesn't my dear sister seem odd to you?" the red-haired young noblewoman asked, evidently perplexed.

"Does she?" I replied. "She seems her usual self to me. Don't you agree, Caren?"

"She's putting on an act," my sister responded with a sour expression. "I'll need to thoroughly inform mom and dad to make certain she doesn't take them in."

"It's just another side of her," I argued. "Let her indulge it once in a while. It's quieter, for one thing."

The scarlet-haired beauty sat one seat apart from the rest of us, looking prim and proper in her white dress as she read a novel. Her broad-brimmed cloth hat, trimmed with red ribbon, hung on a nearby peg. She occasionally cast a languorous glance out the window, in the style of a maiden raised in wealthy seclusion.

Tina clapped her hands to her cheeks and trembled. "L-Lydia is a fanatical believer in the Church of Hogging Mr. Allen!" she cried. "How could she give us the seats next to *and* across from him without a fuss and sit there reading quietly?! It will rain dragons across the kingdom tomorrow!"

"M-Maybe Ms. Lydia isn't feeling well..." Ellie murmured. "I'm concerned for her health."

"I've n-never seen or heard of my dear sister behaving like this," Lynne declared, aghast. "Are you certain it's really her?"

"You're blowing this out of proportion," I said with a laugh, but that didn't prevent my students from launching into a serious debate.

"Allen," my sister interjected, fixing me with her stare, "when did Lydia get that dress and hat?"

"Look, Caren," I said. "You can see it now. Girls, look out the window."

In my anxiousness to avoid further questions, I opened a window, admitting the pleasant fragrance of greenery as our view widened to reveal a tree so large it seemed to reach the heavens. I was home.

"Welcome to the eastern capital," I told my students with a smile. "Enjoy your summer vacation."



The forest capital was the hub of the kingdom's eastern lands, and as its nickname implied, it was awash in verdure. Towering over the city was the Great Tree, which was said to be millennia old. Lesser trees dotted the streets, and vast belts of untouched greenery dwarfed any found in the royal capital or other major cities. Gondolas and other small boats darted to and fro along the countless streams and canals that coursed through the verdant metropolis. The largely wooden buildings, interspersed with only a few stone structures,

contributed to the warm atmosphere that hung over this city of water and flora.

According to my pocket watch, our train slid into Central Station in the eastern capital a little after noon, meaning we were on schedule. We all bundled out onto the wooden platform with our luggage, at which point the girls stared around, marveling at the unique beastfolk spells that had gone into elements of the building's construction. Beastfolk had lived here alongside the Great Tree since antiquity and were responsible for laying the city's foundations.

"How do we go from here, sir?" Tina asked, bursting with excitement.

"That depends on what you want to do," I replied. "My parents live in Old Town, not far from here, but we could still take a carriage."

"If we're already close by, let's walk! This is my first time in the eastern capital!" she exclaimed. "And I'd love to visit the Great Tree too! I read that, unlike the one at the academy, you can go inside!"

"You're always bothering our tutor, Miss First Place," Lynne said scoldingly. "I see vacation hasn't changed that."

"I know you want to walk too," Tina shot back. "Remember, this is Mr. Allen's hometown."

"W-Well... Dear brother, I'd also prefer to go on foot."

"I'd rather we take a carriage," I said. "What about you, Ellie?"

"O-Oh, I'd like to see the city too," the maid replied.

All three girls' eyes were positively shining. Perhaps the walk would be a valuable experience for them...but I decided that we would detour around New Town, the district east of the Great Tree; the area wasn't exactly welcoming to humans. I shot a glance at Caren, who responded with a slight nod. That only left the albatross.

"Let's go on foot," Her Highness assented, unfurling her spotless white parasol. "The girls won't get into any trouble while you and I are with them."

"Lydia," I replied, "I was hoping that you'd go on ahead."

"Thank you for your concern. I sincerely appreciate it. Now, let us be going." She walked off, carrying her brand-new suitcase herself.

Tina and Ellie watched her go in mute amazement. Even Lynne shared their astonishment. At length, they turned to me and demanded in concert, "Just who is that woman?!" Several passersby paused to see what the commotion was before continuing on their respective ways.

I failed to see what the girls found so alarming. Had they never seen that side of Lydia before?

"She seems her usual self to me," I told the trio. They said nothing in reply but exchanged conflicted looks. "Now, Tina..."

“Y-Yes, sir?” the platinum-haired young noblewoman responded, her luggage in hand.

“The Great Tree is a sacred place to the beastfolk, which makes it difficult for humans to approach or enter. Even the dukes are required to give advance notice.”

“Sacred...” Tina repeated, looking up at the Great Tree in the distance. Lynne was following her gaze, and it was during this perceived opening that Ellie made her move.

“Um, Allen, sir, would you please hold my hand?” Her blonde hair swayed about as she spoke. “I think I might get l-lost otherwise.”

“Ellie!” her startled classmates exclaimed. “That’s cheating!”

“Th-The early bird catches the worm.”

The girls were up to their usual antics. I was glad that Ellie had learned to assert herself.

“When you wrote to me that you would be tutoring Tina and Ellie,” Caren muttered as she watched the girls, “I thought you might never come home with me again.”

“Caren...”

“So, I’m glad that I was wrong.” She lifted her bag in both hands and looked away from me, blushing.

I worried too, I thought as I gave my sister a pat on the head.

“Ah!” Tina shouted; she didn’t miss a thing. “Don’t tell me you’re stealing a march on us too, Caren!”

“Tina, this is my natural sisterly right,” Caren replied. “If that bothers you, I suggest you become Allen’s sister too.”

“Mr. Allen’s sister?” Tina, one of the kingdom’s brightest young minds, repeated. She then assumed a deadly serious expression and started to brood. “Hm... That *is* tempting, but...”

Lynne and Ellie ignored the head of their class as they picked up their own bags.

“Allen, let’s go,” Caren urged me. “Her Highness’s proper-young-lady act won’t last long if you don’t hurry up.”

“Caren, some things are better left unspoken,” I replied. “I’m the one who will pay for it later when—”

A piercing gaze from the scarlet-haired beauty standing in front of the platform cut me short. The look in her eyes said, “Kindly. Get. Moving.”

“Tina, we’re leaving,” I informed the girl who was still racking her brain with her head in her hands. “You too, Ellie, Lynne. The beastfolk districts tend to be crowded, so you really wouldn’t want to get lost there. Make certain you stay with the group.”

My warning elicited a startled “Oh, right” from Tina, a nervous “Y-Yessir” from Ellie, and a composed “I’ll stick close to you and Caren, dear brother” from Lynne.

“Good,” I said. “And if you ever do get lost”—my students looked at me with curiosity—“one of the beastfolk will be sure to help if you mention Caren’s or my name.”

Old Town, the beastfolk district to the west of the Great Tree, was as bustling as ever—although there were even fewer humans on its streets than I remembered. Things in New Town, I supposed, must have been even worse. The number of elves and dwarves, on the other hand, remained largely unchanged. Bonds of fellowship had united the long-lived races and the beastfolk since the War of the Dark Lord, due in part to the exploits of a renowned beastfolk hero, who had—

“Allen! Is that you?!” An unexpected shout cut my reflections short. “You’re just in time for some prime forest hog! Here; it’s good!” A diminutive member of the bearlet clan accosted me, bearing a package of meat neatly wrapped in the disinfecting leaves of the Great Tree and looking utterly delighted.

“Toma,” I replied. “I appreciate the thought, but—”

“What?!” he roared. “Too good for my forest hog, are you?!”

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne clung to my sleeves in alarm.

“Thank you so much,” I said, accepting the parcel of meat. “But please, watch your tone—you’re frightening the children.”

“D-Do you raise these creatures?” Tina interjected. “If so, how long would you say they take to reach maturity?”

“Tina?!” I exclaimed.

“Um, uh... Please tell me what dishes this meat tastes best in,” Ellie added.

“Ellie?!”

“Forest hog...” Lynne mused. “I’ve heard the name. Would you recommend anything else?”

“Even you, Lynne?”

The wide-eyed young butcher guffawed. “Hold on! I’ll bring out something special for you!” he announced and then vanished into his shop, leaving the trio’s eyes glittering with anticipation.

We had already been through a series of similar encounters since arriving in the eastern capital. Lydia and Caren, who had evidently foreseen this turn of events, were lightheartedly browsing clothing shops, looking for all the world like a young lady on holiday with her maid attendant. They got along surprisingly well when I wasn’t involved.

I surveyed the numerous presents magically suspended in the air behind me and was just wondering whether my parents’ house had room to store them all when a fruit vendor across the street cheerfully added to the pile. “Why, if it isn’t little Allen,” she said. “Here. They’re freshly picked and simply scrumptious.”

“Shima,” I wearily replied, “do you mean to say that you have even more for me?”

“Of course I do. We were all worried sick when you didn’t come home last winter, you know. I’m so glad to see you look well.” The aproned hare-clan woman, who was somewhat my senior and an old friend of Toma, emerged from her shop to hand me a basket. It was absolutely stuffed with fruits, which the girls wasted no time in examining.

“I’ve never seen this one before!” Tina exclaimed.

Ellie was absorbed in thought as she said, “I wonder if these would be good for jam...”

“The east is so different from the south,” Lynne remarked.

I supposed that this counted as hands-on education. I bobbed my head to Shima and whispered, “Have you made any progress with Toma since I last saw you?”

“I wish the Great Tree’s wrath would come crashing down on that dense bearlet,” she replied in equally hushed tones and then added a theatrical imitation of sobbing.

“I’m in town for ten days, so I’ll give you all the help I can during my stay.”

“Oh, Allen, you’re a dear!”

“You’re dear to me too, Shima.”

I exchanged glances with the hare-clan woman, who was about Ellie’s height, and we both smiled. I had known her since I was little, and she had been like an older sister to me.

It was while we were chatting that the dense bearlet in question returned. “Here you go, girls,” Toma proclaimed. “Feast your eyes on — Shima! When did you get here? And where were you this morning? I thought—”

“Oh, Toma, can I have a moment?” I interrupted and then proceeded to drag the young bearlet-clan man into a corner of his shop. “What I just saw was cause for concern!” I berated him in a whisper. “Could you have been any less tactful?!”

“W-Was I being rude?!” Toma whispered back in alarm. “I... I am trying, but, well...”

“I expected you to be married and have children to show me by now.”

“Children? A-Allen, I...I’m just hopeless.” Toma’s spirits fell precipitously. How many years in a row had I seen this skit play out?

Just then, my sister and the albatross returned from their shopping trip. “Aren’t you done yet, Allen?” Caren asked. “It’s nice to see you again, Shima.”

“Why, Caren!” Shima exclaimed. “You’ve grown into such a lovely young lady. And welcome back to you too, Lydia.”

The albatross seemed uncharacteristically moved by Shima's casual greeting. "It's good to be back," she slowly replied, with an expression that made me deeply regret not bringing a video orb.

Toma held out a new bundle. "Try this too," he said. "It's from a new breed of forest hog—one I haven't put on the market yet."

"Thank you very much," I replied. "You too, Shima. I'll be sure to visit you while I'm in town."

"Great," Toma said. His response was matched by an almost simultaneous "My pleasure" from Shima.

Much the same thing happened everywhere we went. My parents lived not far from Old Town's main thoroughfare, but we made little progress because acquaintances waylaid us at every turn. After we took our leave of Toma and Shima, I found myself forestalling a gossip young squirrel.

"Hey, Mr. Allen! And you've got a pack of girlfriends with you! Talk about big news. I've gotta tell everyone that—"

"Wait! Might I interest you in a tasty treat from the royal capital?"

Then it was a leopard-clan architect who wanted to ask my opinion.

"Oh, Allen! Just who I wanted to see. What do you think of the new canal?"

"I think it's likely to cause traffic jams in its current state. Taking advantage of the blocked-off old waterways might help to..."

Many others followed, although it was hardly surprising. The girls seemed to be enjoying themselves at least, so it wasn't so bad.

"I see," Tina said. "I'm impressed, sir!"

"A-Allen, sir, you got so many presents," Ellie added.

Lynne concluded their joint assessment with a "Simply fascinating, dear brother."

At last, we caught sight of my parents' house, a magical item shop that stood along one of Old Town's inner streets. The area was practically deserted, even during the day. The single-story houses that lined the streets were old and wooden but spacious, with many rooms; children must have been numerous back when they were built, prior to the War of the Dark Lord.

A petite wolf-clan woman stood outside, cleaning the storefront. She had the same silver-gray ears and tail as Caren but with longer, shoulder-length hair. She was not much taller than Tina or Lynne and was youthfully dressed in a "kimono"—as the usual attire of the Old Town beastfolk was known—and an apron. At the moment, she was singing her heart out as she swung her broom. Caren and I stopped walking and covered our faces with our hands.

"Sir, sir," Tina said, tugging on my left sleeve. "Isn't that lady an amazing singer?"

“Sh-She’s incredible,” Ellie agreed, following suit on my right. “I’m j-jealous.”

“Oh,” I replied. “Yes, she is. I believe she was the best singer in the clan when she was younger.”

“Do you know her, dear brother?” Lynne interjected.

“Know her?” I replied. “Well, you could say— Whoa!”

The albatross tossed her hat and bag to me and sprinted ahead with astonishing speed. “Mother!” she cried, embracing the woman. “It’s been too long! How I’ve missed you!”

““Mother”?!” my three students exclaimed in unison.

“Goodness,” the small woman in Lydia’s arms said, smiling up at her gently. “Welcome back. Have you been well?”

“I have! And I’m simply delighted that you seem well too.”

“Why, thank you. I think that deserves a hug.” The woman cheerfully returned the embrace, to the albatross’s undisguised joy. Her face, which was so much like Caren’s, peeked over Lydia’s shoulder...and then she spotted me. Her countenance lit up with a radiant smile as she called my name with unmistakable affection.

My eyes strayed down to my feet, and when I finally mustered the courage to respond, it was with a simple “Here I am.”

The woman released Lydia, planted her clenched hands on her hips, and proclaimed, “Welcome home. It certainly took you long enough!”

“Sorry, but I’m back now...mom.”



My mom Ellyn and I were not related by blood. She was a trueborn member of the wolf clan, like my dad and sister. My parents, who had been close since childhood, had still been traveling merchants when they had found me in an abandoned house on the outskirts of the eastern capital, with nothing to show where I was from. Even my name came from them.

A mischievous look entered my mom’s eyes as I approached her and Lydia. “Now, tell me,” she said, “are those little ladies in the running to be your future bride?”

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne froze.

Caren pressed a hand to her forehead and sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t say things like that, mom,” she said. “Or sing in the street either.”

“What’s that, Caren?” our mom replied. “Are you not forgetting something?”

“It’s good to be home,” Caren added sheepishly.

“Welcome back! Have a hug!” our mom chirped, beaming, and threw her arms around Caren. She was a serial hugger!

“M-Mom!” Caren protested. “Let go. The younger girls from school are watching.”

“Squeeeeeeze!” our mom said, undeterred.

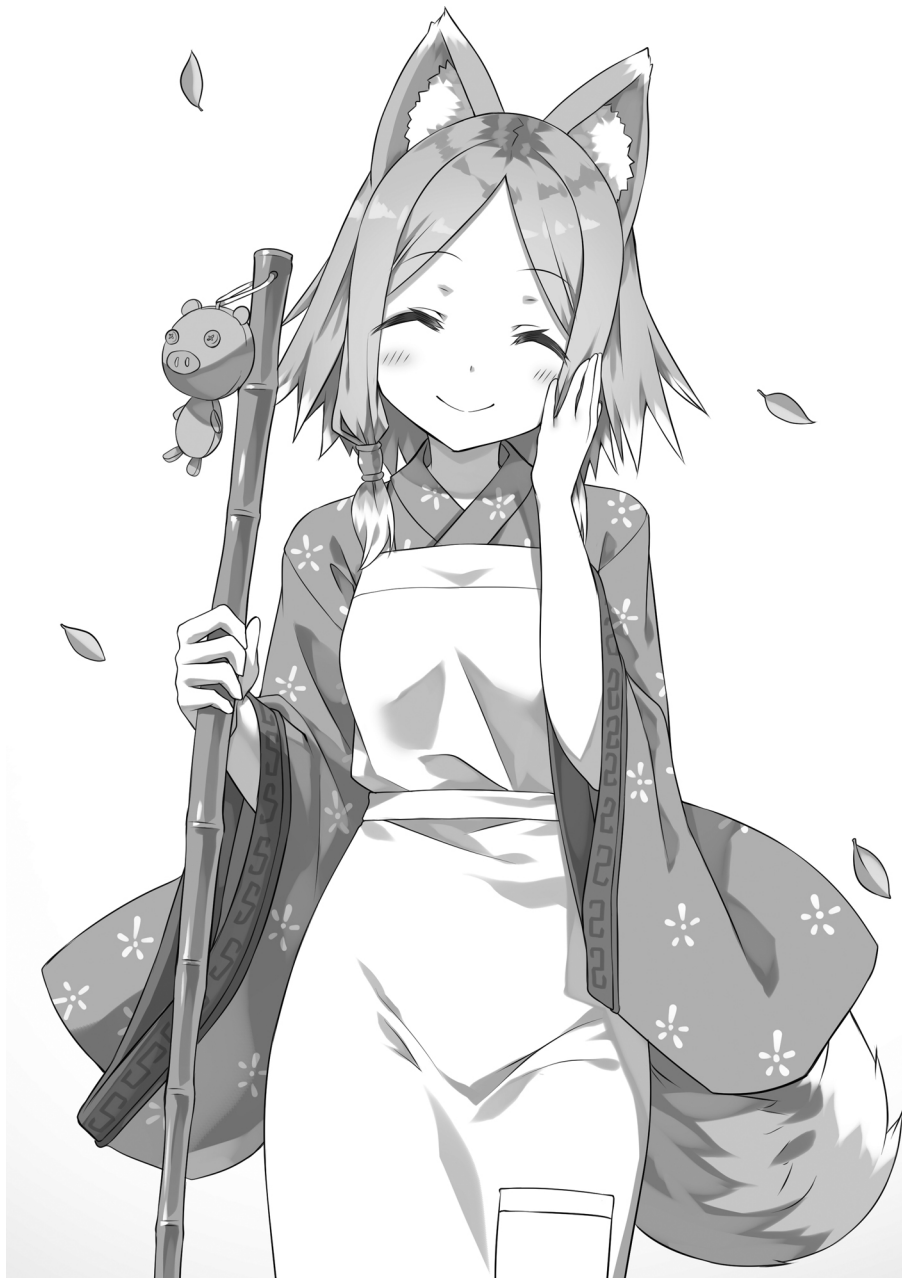
Eventually, Caren gave in and repeated, “Squeeze...” Neither of us had ever managed to overcome our mom when she was smiling like this.

The albatross, who was standing back and looking self-possessed, took it upon herself to say, “Allen’s future bride is right here, mother.”

“Oh, of course. How could I forget?” my mom replied. “You and Allen have had marriage in view since—”

“Mom, I’m sorry I haven’t been home,” I quickly interjected. “Honestly, I am. So please, don’t tease me!”

She giggled and then bowed to Tina, Ellie, and Lynne. “Thank you for being so good to Allen and Caren,” she said. “I’m their mother, Ellyn. They’ve told me so much about you in their letters. I know you’ll only be with us for a short time, but please enjoy your stay.”



Lydia looked disgruntled for some reason. My students, meanwhile, were still petrified.

"Mom, we brought presents," I said, pointing to the cloth bags floating behind me. "People kept giving them to us on our way through Old Town."

"Goodness," my mom responded. "There are so many. Hm... Whatever shall we do with them all?"

"Have you bought an icebox?" I asked. The appliances were expensive, but I thought that my parents might be able to afford one with the money I sent home to them.

"We have! It comes in so handy. Now that's what I call magic." She followed that remark by fixing me with an intent stare.

"Y-Yes?" I asked.

"Allen," she chirped, "I'm so glad to see how many people love you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't know who spread the word that you were coming home, but someone must have, because we've been getting so many gifts! You'll have to eat a lot while you're here."

I turned away, feeling embarrassed, and saw my sister and the albatross looking triumphant.

Oh dear.

My mom took advantage of that opportunity to plant herself in front of the girls and start issuing orders. "Now, let's get to work," she said. "Lydia, Caren, keep Allen pinned down. He's so shy that he always gets in the way when I try to ask about him."

"Of course, mother. Over here, Allen," the albatross replied, wasting no time seizing my right arm and pressing her head against it.

"I'm on it," my sister added, circling around to my left. She extended a hand—then lowered it and began casting lightning spells.

H-How could my own mother set the two of them on me? D-Don't tell me she's angry!

"Are you Ellie?" my mom asked the blonde maid.

"Y-Yes'm!" Ellie stammered. "Mr. Allen is, uh, so, um, amazing...and I'm just hopeless. But I'm so grateful that he helped me to get into the Royal Academy, and—"

"You're adorable!" my mom exclaimed, interrupting the maid with a hug. "No wonder Allen describes you as 'a charming little angel' on such a regular basis! And we even have similar names!"

"I'm a-adorable? And an a-angel?" Ellie let out a little squeal. Meanwhile, searing pain shot through me as the bones in my right arm audibly creaked.

My mom released Ellie and turned back to face Tina and Lynne

with a slightly quizzical expression. “Sh-She’s just like him,” both girls declared in unison, much to my consternation.

“Would Your Highnesses prefer I address you formally?” my mom inquired.

“Think of me as your daughter!” was the unanimous response.

“Thank you. Now, you must be Lynne.”

The red-haired girl was stiff as a board, but she still managed a proper curtsy. “L-Lynne Leinster, at your service. My dear brother has been extremely kind to me.”

My mom laughed. “You’re just like Lydia was on her first visit. I wonder, what was it that Allen wrote again? ‘I’m sometimes shocked at how grown-up Lynne acts now.’”

“Dear brother!”

Lynne, is that really something to look so thrilled about? And Lydia, I’ll say this as many dozens of times as it takes—there’s nothing funny about a Firebird at this distance.

Caren would ordinarily have been quick to rebuke the seething albatross around my neck, but to my surprise, she was holding her peace.

“And I suppose that makes you Tina,” my mom continued, turning to the platinum-haired young noblewoman.

Tina pressed her right hand to the left side of her chest and looked my mom squarely in the eye. “Yes, I am Tina Howard,” she said. “Mr. Allen found me when I was lost in the dark and gave me magic. I’m so grateful— No, words don’t even begin to... Mrs. Ellyn! Thank you so, so, so much for raising him!” She bowed deeply, with tears streaming down her face.

My mom put a gentle hand on Tina’s head and embraced her. “My goodness. That must have been so hard for you. But don’t worry. It’s all right now.”

“Y-Yes, it is! So, um...” Tina fidgeted for a moment, then steeled herself and said, “W-Would you mind if...I called you ‘mother’ too?”

“I don’t mind,” my mom replied, laughing. “You’re just as Allen said: ‘A nice, cheerful girl. She’s also earnest and, what’s more, simply brilliant.’”

“What? M-Mr. Allen said that about *me*?” Tina’s eyes opened wider than ever, then she immediately looked down in evident embarrassment.

Lydia abruptly left my side, while Caren instantly seized my left arm, holding me so that I couldn’t move without exposing myself to numerous bolts of violet lightning.

“Mother,” the albatross said softly, “I, um, have a request.”

“Yes?” my mom replied.

Lady Lydia Leinster lowered her gaze with an air of sorrow, the

very image of a tragic beauty. “May I read Allen’s letters to you?” she asked. “I have so few opportunities to hear him speak well of me. Oh, if I only had something to reassure me.”

She’s lying! Someone stop this faker!

“Be quiet, Allen,” Caren scolded me. “This is an important discussion.”

Is it really?

But even our mom seemed reluctant to grant the albatross’s absurd request. “Hm... I’m not sure I can show the letters themselves, even to you, Lydia.”

Thank goodness! I’m in the clear so long as—

Just then, the albatross palmed a small video orb into my mom’s hand. It contained a recording of me in the royal capital. My mom was taken aback, but then a devilish look entered her eyes and she began to laugh.

O-Oh no!

“How are Lisa and Anna?” she asked.

“Quite well,” Lydia replied. “Almost *too* well.”

“I’m so glad! All right, you can read his letters—but don’t keep them to yourself. Let’s all read them together! Now, lend me a hand. We’ll need a table and chairs, and I’ll put on some delightful tea.”

“Thank you so much. I love you, mother.”

“I love you too, Lydia. It’s so nice to see you again. And I’m so glad to meet you, Tina, Ellie, Lynne.” My mom giggled. “Allen always has so many lovely things to say about all of you.”

“Mom?!” I cried. “Wait—” But before I could stop her, she vanished into the house, followed by my students and Lydia. Had there ever been a sentence so tyrannical?

As my mom had intimated, I praised my students to high heaven in my letters. Lydia and Caren as well. Having them find out would be...embarrassing. My mom must have known that, so why—

Oh, I knew it.

“It’s high time you realize how much you mean to people,” Caren said; she was the only one who hadn’t hurried away into the house. “I can’t wait to find out what you wrote about me.”

Although there were no passersby to overhear, having my extolling letters read by their subjects proved to be a form of psychological torture. I resolved to never anger my mom again.

*

Having somehow made it through my harsh ordeal, I rocked in an armchair with a view of the inner courtyard—a garden grown from seeds of the Great Tree.

“S-Sir,” Tina ventured. “You see...”

Lynne joined her with an equally hesitant “D-Dear brother, um...”

“A-Allen, sir, that made me so happy!” Ellie proclaimed, showing far less restraint than the other two. Her hands were clasped together in apparent reverence.

“Ellie,” I said languidly, “they call that ‘rubbing salt in the wound.’”

Her response was a groan of dismay.

The humiliation of having my letters read aloud to the girls had exhausted me. I hoped that hugging the nearby angel would speed my recovery, but before I could reach her, my sister loomed between us.

“Be serious, Allen,” Caren said. “It can’t have taken *that* much out of you.”

“You should try it sometime,” I replied. “You’ll lose some part of your soul, I assure you.”

“I’d rather not. Now, what am I going to do with you?” She paused for a moment in thought, said, “Don’t expect this all the time,” and then wrapped her arms around me. The gesture provoked cries of “What?!” “Huh?!” and “I... I don’t believe it!” from the girls. It somewhat startled me as well.

“Did that help?” Caren murmured, her tone equal parts bashful and surly. “I was mad that you didn’t come home with me last winter, you know. Please never do that again.” She was everyone’s big sister at school, but perhaps coming home had brought back a hint of the needy little one I remembered. The girls seemed to appreciate that too, because they had fallen silent.

Her words hung in the air for a moment. “It did,” I said at last, tenderly rubbing her back. “Sorry. And thank you.”

At that point, Lydia returned from helping my mom load perishable gifts into the icebox. She immediately grasped the situation and shot me a look that said, “Say, would you tell me why you wrote less about me than the others?”

D-Did I really?

My mom entered on Lydia’s heels. “Caren,” she called, “would you show Lydia and the younger girls to their— Oh, what have we here?” She chuckled. “I see someone is looking for affection. Still, show them to their rooms for me. Allen, fetch your father.”

“All right,” Caren replied, quickly stepping away from me. Her cheeks were a little flushed. “*Ahem*. Follow me. Tina, Ellie, Lynne, the three of you will all sleep in one room. Lydia, you’ll be sharing mine.”

“Thank you!” the trio chirped.

“I’m looking forward to another year of your hospitality, Caren,” Lydia quipped, eliciting an indescribable look from my sister that made me chuckle.

“Mom,” I said, “is dad in his workshop?”

“He is. He’s been so excited to see you again.”

“Has he?” I said without enthusiasm. “Caren, take good care of everyone.”

“Don’t worry; they’re in good hands,” my sister responded. “And, um, Allen...”

“I know. Thank you.” I gave her a light pat on the head.

The albatross clenched her fists and silently cheered me on. She seemed to be saying that everything was going to be fine—that she was here for me every step of the way. I would do my best, I decided. I had been running away for quite a while now, but it was time to come clean.

My dad made his living crafting and selling magical items for personal use. His workshop was at the very back of the house. Its walls and door had always been thick and sturdy—a precaution due to his frequent experiments—and Lydia, Caren, and I had reinforced them with a myriad of elemental barriers during our visit the previous year. They wouldn’t break anytime soon.

I stood outside the workshop, breathed deeply, and then knocked. “Dad, I’m coming in,” I announced, then opened the door and stepped through without waiting for an answer.

My dad, Nathan, looked up from his workbench as I entered. A pair of small antique glasses perched on his face, which was notably handsome, even adjusting for my bias. His ears and tail were a darker gray than my mom’s or Caren’s, and I thought that he was probably still just a bit taller than me. His most striking feature, however, was his gentle smile. I could tell that he was beside himself with joy.

“Allen,” he called, his voice firm and deep.

“Dad,” I said hesitantly. “I’m home.”

“It’s good to have you back. Have you seen Ellyn?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, good.” He chuckled. “Do you know, she hasn’t been able to sit still since we heard that you were coming home. Not that I’ve been any better.”

“Yeah.”

“And do my eyes deceive me, or have you grown?”

“Yeah.”

“You might even be taller than me the next time I see you.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you been eating and sleeping right? You look a little pale.”

“Yeah.”

“Allen?” He looked perplexed.

“Y-You see, dad... I... I...”

My intention was to reveal that I hadn’t made the court sorcerers,

but the words wouldn't come. I had been planning how I would go about telling him ever since I made up my mind to return home, but now that I was here, I simply couldn't do it.

I hadn't grown up poor, but I wouldn't have described my family as "well off" either. And yet, my parents had sent me to develop my talents at the Royal Academy without the slightest hesitation. I had wanted to live up to their love and expectations at any cost—to repay the pair who had taken me in and raised me, an unrelated human they had never even seen before. But just when my goal had been almost in my grasp, I had chosen to throw it away.

I didn't regret that decision. If given the chance to do it all over again, I felt certain that I would always beat the stuffing out of Gerard. Yet at the same time, my heart was full of remorse for letting my parents down. I knew—at least rationally—that they would never give up on me, even after all this. But I still couldn't stop wondering—what if they turned on me? That fear was still holding me back, even after all this time.

Could I be any more pathetic?

As I was hanging my head, my dad stepped toward me and placed a strong hand on my left shoulder. "Allen," he said.

I mustered my courage. "Dad...I'm sorry. You sent me to the royal capital. You put me through not just the Royal Academy, but the university too. Yet I... I spoiled my own court sorcerer exam, and—"

"Thank you."

I looked up, momentarily stunned. "What?"

"So many people have told me what happened," he said, his face brimming with affection. "You couldn't stand by and let Ellyn and me, and Caren and Lydia, be insulted, could you? Well done! That's my boy! Ellyn and I are proud of you from the bottom of our hearts. You've grown into a fine young man."

His unforeseen words brought a surge of warm feelings from deep within my heart.

"But that's no excuse to stay away from home," he added. "You need to visit once in a while so that we can see that you're— Allen?"

"It's... It's nothing."

Oh, of course. How could I forget what they're like? They've always loved, believed in, and cared for me with all their hearts.

"Nathan! How could you?!" my mom cried, bursting into the room. "We promised to tell him how proud we are together! You have no idea how hard it was for me to hold it all in!" No sooner had she reached us than she wrapped her arms around me. "Oh, you're such a silly boy! Nathan and I would always have been happy to see you! As long as you come back to us safe and sound, what more could we ask for?"

I recalled the warmth I had felt as a child and smiled. “Mom, dad...” I said, determined to share the flood of emotions coursing through me.

“Yes?”

“What is it?”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m truly, truly glad to be your son.”



Late that evening, I carried a chair and a little round table out into the inner courtyard to enjoy the cool night air alone. On the table rested a small lamp, a bottle of locally made red wine, and some cheese purchased in the royal capital. The moon hung in the starry sky, joined by the occasional meteor. Caren and I had used to gaze up at this sight from our beds, or so I recalled, but she and the albatross had already retired for the night. I wouldn’t be surprised to find them sleeping hand in hand when I checked in on them the next morning.

The girls were likewise sound asleep in the large bed they shared. It belonged to a full set of furnishings that had apparently arrived by griffin mail a few days ago. The sender was Lisa Leinster, meaning that the quality went without saying. The long accompanying letter, addressed to my mom, boiled down to: “You’ll be looking after both my daughters, so providing their furniture is the least I can do. Please let me know if you need anything else.” Lisa and my mom had met in person three years previously and had apparently been in correspondence ever since.

I raised my glass to my lips and took a sip of wine. It was exquisitely delicious, and I wondered whether I ought to recommend it to Felicia as I nibbled on a pleasantly salty morsel of cheese. The whole experience made me feel as though I were in a restaurant, but my enjoyment was soon interrupted by a familiar voice from the house.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Tina?” I said. “Did I wake you?”

“No, but I could see your light. May I join you?”

“Of course. But bring one of those chairs with you; I haven’t got a spare.”

“I will,” the nightgown-clad noblewoman replied. A moment later, she stepped out into the inner courtyard with a chair in her arms, plunked the seat down opposite me, and then sank into it, her feet dangling off the ground. I filled a spare glass with ice water and offered it to her.

“Thank you!” she chirped.

“You ought to take it easy after our long trip.”

We clinked our glasses together, and they rang with a beautiful

note. Tina then held hers in both hands and murmured, "It's just the two of us, sir..." with a quiet giggle. She drank her water with evident relish, as indicated by that very emotive lock of her bangs swaying in delight.

"So, what do you think of the eastern capital?" I asked.

"I think it's lovely," my beaming student replied. "It's full of plants, the water is clean, and there's just something warm about it. Your mother and father are even nicer and better looking than I'd imagined them. And most importantly...this is your hometown. I'm so glad that I'm getting to visit."

"I'm pleased to hear it," I said, then returned to my cheese and wine.

"May I ask you a question, sir?"

"You may."

"Why did you want to be a court sorcerer?"

I hesitated for a moment. "It's not a very interesting story."

"Still. I want to hear it."

"Do you now?" The subject was unpleasant to remember but equally difficult to forget. Taking care to keep my tone casual, I said, "I've mentioned that I was an orphan, haven't I?"

"Yes. You told me before I enrolled in the Royal Academy. How could I ever forget?" She meant our conversation in the inner courtyard of the Howards' mansion in the royal capital. I would never forget that day either—I couldn't if I tried.

I sipped my drink, then asked, "What did you think of the beastfolk when you passed through their district today?"

"They were so friendly!" she gushed. "And they all seemed to love you."

"That's true, but when I was younger, they could be rather...clannish."

"You mean they excluded you?" Tina asked. "I can't imagine that."

I tipped more wine into my empty glass. "Ten years or more ago, a human man ran over a little fox-clan girl from New Town with his carriage. She was only six years old, and she died shielding her little sister. The collision only happened because the man broke the law by bringing his private carriage into the area around the Great Tree."

Tina gasped.

"Naturally, the full council of chieftains voted unanimously to petition old Duke Algren, demanding a harsh sentence against the man," I continued. "His guilt was obvious. And yet...he was never charged."

"Wh-Why not?"

"Why do you think?" I took another drink as the sound of wind

chimes reached me from somewhere in the distance.

The girl pondered the question, then her expression turned grave. "Because the man was a noble—and at least an earl, at that?"

"Precisely. Soon after the incident, he fled with his family to the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit. The family of the poor girl who lost her life then moved as well, so the whole business was swept under the rug."

"What?! How could that..." Tina clapped a hand to her mouth. Time hadn't made the story any less unpleasant.

"The beastfolk consider togetherness to be of the utmost importance," I said. "When the council learned that the man would go unpunished, the former chairman relinquished his post and his chieftaincy—customarily, the wolf-clan chieftain leads the council. The other chieftains did likewise on the grounds that, in failing to save their family, they had lost the right."

"All of them?"

"Yes. And the very next day, the bullying I faced got much worse."

Tina stiffened, tears welling from her eyes. "What...?" The darkness deepened as a cloud passed over the moon.

"It happens with children of any race," I said, winking. "I could barely cast a spell at the time, and I was the only one who looked human, so I ended up bawling my eyes out a lot. The adults turned a blind eye."

"That's awful!" Tina cried. She was such a kind girl, showing such genuine concern over ancient history.

"But every time I came home in tears, my mom and dad would say, 'You're our son, Allen—a treasure that the Great Tree blessed us with.' I believe they even seriously considered moving for my benefit—although there are no wolf-clan communities outside the eastern capital. They never mentioned it in my earshot, of course, but children are strangely sensitive to these things. I remember crying myself to sleep every night."

"I understand," Tina said slowly. "I did the same thing."

I took out my handkerchief and wiped the tears trickling down her cheeks. "It was only for a short time. The bullying stopped as my spellcasting improved."

She hung her head, looking forlorn. "I'd been thinking that you've seemed down lately. Now it makes sense. What happened at your court sorcerer exam is still bothering you, so returning to the eastern capital made you feel—" Her words broke off with a gulp as I thrust a fresh slice of cheese into her mouth. She was clever as well as kind.

"Permit me to continue," I said, holding my index finger to my lips. "Once I learned to use a little magic, I wondered whether I could

earn any money with it. This was my first idea!" I seized a paper paddle fan from the table, pointed it at the young noblewoman, and cast a simple spell.

Despite her gloomy mood, Tina responded with a squeal and a cry of "S-Sir!" when the cold breeze swept over her, ruffling the delicate strands of her hair.

I chuckled. "I tried to earn some pocket money by offering passersby a cool breeze in summer and warm drafts in winter."

"I... I see. I suppose people would pay a little for—"

"I failed, of course."

"Huh?"

"You should have seen Caren working away long after I'd exhausted my mana! I'll never forget the valiant figure she cut!" Hadn't she been upset with me when we got home? I recalled her moving declaration: "Don't push yourself, big brother! Watch me do it!"

"I learned from my failure," I continued. "My mana wasn't up to the task of sustained spellcasting. So, I decided to make magical flowers next—just like I asked of you and Ellie. As a result—"

"You ran out of mana, and Caren got mad at you?"

"Just so," I admitted reluctantly.

That took me back. Caren had always been a caring sister—although she had gone through a rebellious phase. I refilled my wineglass, then took two slices of cheese and gave one to my student.

"There's not much left to tell," I resumed. "I studied magic as best I could and learned that court sorcerer is one of the highest posts a spellcaster can aspire to. Then, one day, our clan chieftain suggested that I apply to the Royal Academy. It wasn't an easy decision for me, given the cost of tuition"—I drained my glass—"but my parents sent me off with smiles. I gave the entrance exam my best effort, although I hardly expected to meet Lydia and end up in a fight with the headmaster."

"He mentioned you during our last exam," Tina interjected. "His exact words were: 'You girls are still far preferable to *those two*.'"

"Don't blame me," I replied. "That was ninety-five percent Lady Lydia Leinster's handiwork."

Tina laughed. "You're probably right." She rested her head in her hands and stared kindly at me. Then, a thought seemed to strike her. "Hang on. Couldn't you have joined the royal guard just as easily?"

"They tried to recruit me, but I declined."

"What?!" This was the most surprised she had looked all night.

I planted my elbows on the table, clasped my hands in front of my face, and gravely intoned, "I had a good reason to prefer the court sorcerers to the royal guard."

“Y-You did?” Tina asked, sitting up straight in tense expectation of my next words.

“Knights of the guard are shockingly underpaid.”

After a moment of stunned silence, the nightgown-clad girl let out a stupefied “Huh?”

I threw up my hands and gave my head an exaggerated shake. “A court sorcerer earns, I’d say...about five times the wage.”

“I-Is it really that big a difference?”

“Membership in the guard was long considered an honorary position. In any case, that’s why I wanted to be a court sorcerer.” I poured the last of the wine into my glass. It truly was excellent; perhaps I would write to Felicia recommending that she stock some after all. “Are you disappointed that my ambitions aren’t loftier?”

It seemed only natural that Tina would feel some letdown, and her silence and downcast eyes seemed to confirm my suspicions.

“Tina—”

“Sir,” the young noblewoman said at exactly the same time, slowly rising to her feet. “I don’t believe in gods. None of them helped me, no matter how much I prayed. But”—a beam of moonlight shone on her as she placed a hand over her heart and gave a quiet smile that belied her youth—“I’m sincerely grateful to have met you. To me, you’re light itself.”

Her unbound hair glistened, blown by a gust of wind.



Oh, how beautiful she is... I thought as I reached out and touched her cheek.

"S-Sir?" she stammered.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm so glad that I've had the opportunity to tutor you girls."

Tina placed her hand over mine. "S-Sir, I, um... I'd—"

"Okay, stop it right there," a voice interrupted. Its owner reached over me with her elegant right arm, plucked my glass off the table, and took a gulp from it.

Tina shrieked.

"My, that tasted lovely," the newcomer remarked with some surprise.

"Lydia," I said, "I hope you realize that was mine."

"What difference does it make?" the albatross replied. "Anyway, we always share glasses."

"You shouldn't tell lies. Now, what brings you here?" I turned to see her pout and down another gulp. To my annoyance, she was drinking from the same spot where my lips had been just a moment ago.

"I just happened to wake up," she said. "It's past your bedtime, Tiny, so stop bothering us adults."

Oh no. She's already starting to look tipsy.

"What?! Now you've shown your true colors!" Tina snapped, flying into a temper. "Y-You won't be able to look down on me like that for long! I'll catch up to you in no time and— U-Um, Lydia?" Her provocation soon gave way to confusion when the albatross failed to respond.

"Simply unbelievable," I said, sighing as Lydia closed her eyes, slumped against me, and fell asleep. Tina was obviously struggling to keep up with the situation as I heaved the dozing noblewoman onto my back and stood up.

"Let me be frank: Lydia loves to drink, but she has no tolerance for alcohol," I explained. "I'm sure how hectic she's been lately hasn't helped, and neither has travel."

"Oh..." Tina responded with dawning comprehension.

I glanced at the albatross, who was breathing rhythmically against my shoulder. If only she looked so ladylike when she was awake.

"Shall we be on our way?" I solemnly asked Tina. "I need to carry her to Caren's room, and detection will result in a very long talking-to, even at this hour. Will you accompany me on this dangerous mission?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, playing along. "Wherever you go, I shall follow."

“Thank you. Oh, and I almost forgot.” I winked at her. “Let’s pick up where we left off tonight some other time. It will be something to look forward to once you’re old enough to drink.”

“I’d like that.”

Caren was waiting outside her bedroom door, but she took Lydia off my hands without a word of complaint—or anything else. I wondered what the matter was.



The next day’s busy schedule started bright and early.

Caren kicked off the morning with a sparring match against Tina, Ellie, and Lynne in the inner courtyard. I offered to join in, but my sister assured me that the girls were in good hands with her, so I observed them from the comfort of the sidelines.

Once they finished training, all four of them went for a morning bath. They returned in fresh clothes just as Lydia arrived, wearing an apron, to call us all to breakfast. Tina and Lynne clasped hands and screamed, “A gh-ghost in broad daylight?!” the moment they set eyes on her. Ellie added a teary-eyed admission that she was “n-no match” for Lydia after tasting the meal the albatross had prepared. Lydia Leinster could do just about anything.

The girls spent the remainder of the morning in study, working on their summer homework from the Royal Academy. I was pleased to see how willingly Caren volunteered to help them.

Lunch was a dish of cold noodles and scrumptious fresh vegetables. Another tip to send Felicia, perhaps?

The air temperature rose in the afternoon, and Tina, Ellie, and Lynne still needed to work on their spell control. So, hoping to kill two birds with one stone, I assigned them to cool the house—a challenge Tina rose to by creating icebergs and a field of snow. The phenomenon attracted local children, and an unseasonable snowball fight ensued. The sight of Caren leading the trio to a crushing victory brought back fond memories.

I, meanwhile, spent my time on a chair in the inner courtyard, reading the books I had brought, formulating new spells, and turning the tables on any ill-behaved children who tried to catch me unawares. How good it was to be at peace!

Lydia alternated between helping my mom and stopping to check in on me. To my amusement, the neighborhood children hid themselves whenever the albatross appeared—by instinct, I presumed.

Evening sneaked up on me. Before I knew it, the sun was low in the sky, and it cast a hazy light while I took it upon myself to clear the ice from the inner courtyard. I could hear the far-off music of drums and flutes; all the beastfolk would be celebrating the Summer Festival

that night. We would need time to reach it, given that only two bridges—one in Old Town and one in New Town—offered access to the festivities. I wondered what was taking the girls so long to get ready.

The first test fireworks went up near the Great Tree just as Tina, Ellie, and Lynne called to me from behind. I could tell without looking how tense they were.

“S-Sir.”

“A-Allen, sir.”

“D-Dear brother.”

“Oh, good. If you’re all ready, let’s—”

I turned, and the words died on my lips. All three girls wore matching yukata—patterned with summer flowers in pale blue, green, and red, respectively—and clutched little cloth bags. Had my mom gotten the garments from neighbors and then altered them herself? But how had she known the girls’ sizes before our arrival? The thorough preparations bespoke the influence of both ducal houses’ head maids.

“Sir.”

“Um, Allen, sir.”

“Dear brother, don’t keep us in suspense!”

My silence had provoked another round of bashful urging. Although my students were all children, their looks were stunning nonetheless. I hardly thought it fair of them to blindside me like this.

I cleared my throat. “You look most charming.”

The girls giggled happily.

Lydia, clad in a dazzling pale-scarlet yukata and with her hair done up, was the next to arrive. “Mind your manners,” she scolded the trio in elder-sisterly fashion. “Wait by the front door; we’ll be leaving any moment now.”

The girls cried, “We know!” in response and then raced off with a pitter-patter.

Lydia had just one word for me: “Thoughts?!”

“Did my mom adjust those for all four of you?” I replied.

“You *know* that wasn’t what I meant!” she snapped. “Could you *be* any less endearing?!”

“You look lovely. Simply radiant,” I reluctantly admitted. She had left me no choice.

Lydia blushed. “I... I’ll consider that a pass.” She held out a hand, which I slowly clasped, and we walked indoors.

Should I wear a yukata too? I wondered. *I might be tall enough for one of dad’s now.*

My mom and sister were the last to join us. Caren wore a short-sleeved top and short pants in lieu of a yukata, to her evident

displeasure.

“Weren’t the girls adorable?” my mom asked, beaming.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “Adjusting four yukata must have been hard work.”

“Not at all! I’ll make new ones for next year. Oh, I can hardly wait.”

“Don’t go overboard. Who knows if they’ll even visit next year?”

She laughed musically. “The girls are waiting. You three take care of them, now.”

“We will.”

“Don’t worry,” Caren added a beat later.

“Won’t the two of you be joining us?” Lydia asked my mom.

“Nathan and I will be watching the fireworks from here,” she said. “Have fun.”

“All right,” I replied. “We won’t stay out too late.”

Now, it’s high time we—

Caren glanced at me and then broached the topic that had evidently been preying on her mind. “Mom, d-don’t you have a yukata for me too?”

“But you refused to wear one out of the house last year,” our mom replied, perplexed.

“I... I know, but...” Caren’s response devolved into inaudible muttering punctuated by furtive looks at me. “Allen complimented everyone else. I don’t want to be the only one left out.”

Her behavior seemed to make sense to our mother, who laughed and said, “I see. In that case, I promise to fix one up for you while you’re here. Your bust size hasn’t changed, has it?”

“M-Mom! A-Allen, cover your ears!”

I shrugged. If Caren was going in her everyday clothes, then I would go in mine. No sooner had I made up my mind than our mom caught my eye with a look that said, “You’re such a thoughtful brother.”

I could hardly do any less; Caren is the world’s most adorable sister and the only one I’ve got.



A massive channel encircled the Great Tree, the symbol of the eastern capital. The Great Bridge offered the only dry route across, and the beastfolk celebrated their festivals at its foot, in the city’s largest plaza. Carriages could go no farther, as they were forbidden on the bridge itself.

Tina let out a whoop of delight when she saw the plaza. It was already lined with tall wooden bandstands, from which festival music filled the air.

“L-Look at all the food stands,” Ellie chimed in.

“I...I’ve never seen so many beastfolk before,” Lynne added, awestruck.

Indeed, the plaza was thronged with beastfolk of all shapes and sizes. They were happily chatting, exchanging toasts, purchasing food from the many stalls, and generally enjoying themselves. A scattering of elves and dwarves, most wearing yukata, mingled with the crowd; while the Summer Festival was an occasion for ancestor worship among the beastfolk, other races were welcome to join in. I was nevertheless unsurprised to see very few humans, although I thought they had been a little less scarce the year before.

Once we crossed the bridge from Old Town, Lydia abruptly clapped her hands for attention. The girls turned to look at her, confused, and she tossed them each a change purse from her cloth bag. In the absence of my parents, the albatross had reverted to her usual willful self.

“Use these,” she said. “None of you know your way around a festival yet.”

My startled students looked to me for an explanation.

“There are too many booths for one person to visit them all,” I informed them. “Copper coins will buy you just about anything here.”

“I see!” exclaimed Tina.

Ellie was positively beaming. “Y-You’re amazing, Lydia, ma’am!”

“Wh-Why, dear sister, whenever did you find the time to get us these?” Lynne asked.

Lydia and I had spent our last day in the royal capital visiting a seemingly endless series of shops to pick out those purses for the girls.

“We’ll meet up here,” the albatross continued, ignoring Lynne’s question. “Tiny and Lynne, you’re in charge of cotton candy. Ellie, you get us ice pops. Who will go for drinks?”

“I’d be happy to get—” I began, but Caren’s hand shot up before I could finish.

“I’ll buy them,” she said. “Allen, you wait here. With this many people, we’ll need someone to mark our meeting spot.”

“Very well,” I replied. “I’ll wait for you, then.”

“Let’s go!” the trio shouted eagerly. They were giddy with the festive atmosphere.

Lydia checked the time on her pocket watch. “If you drag your feet, I won’t hesitate to leave you behind. Especially you, Tiny.”

“Humph! I could say the same to you!” Tina shot back.

“Take care,” I said, surveying the four errand runners. “Try not to take too long.”

A whole host of people stopped to say hello to me while I waited

for the girls. Most were members of the wolf, leopard, bearlet, hare, ape, otter, cat, and squirrel clans of Old Town, but I met friends from New Town's fox, weasel, goat, ox, and rat clans as well. I was unsure how to respond to the universal demand to know why I hadn't come home in the winter—my tussle with Gerard at the court sorcerer exam wasn't common knowledge, it seemed.

I was idly watching the world go by while listening to the festival flutes and drums when I spotted Caren on her way back with five wooden cups on a small tray. No sooner had I waved to her, however, than she stopped and assumed a confused expression.

Hm?

A yukata-clad wolf-clan boy, who was boisterously talking over his shoulder to his friends, barreled into her from the right without warning. They both let out startled exclamations as the tray went flying, dousing the boy in fruit-infused water. Caren toppled into a sitting position.

"Watch it!" the indignant youth shouted. "Do you know how much this yukata is— Huh? Oh, it's you, Caren. I didn't know you were back in town. You've really filled out since I last saw you. Oh, I know! How about a date to make up for what you did to my clothes?"

"You bumped into *me*," my sister snapped, incensed.

"Oh, come on. Is that any way to talk to a guy whose yukata you just ruined?" He turned to his entourage of other beastfolk boys. "I was looking where I was going the whole time, right, guys?"

One by one, his buddies came to his defense, smirking unpleasantly all the while.

"Yup."

"You were looking straight ahead."

"No doubt about it."

Caren lost her temper, but I got between her and the boy before she could act. "You were looking behind you," I said. "I was watching."

"Allen..." My sister sounded dispirited, so I shot her a reassuring glance over my shoulder.

In front of me, the boy clicked his tongue. "So, you're back in town too, Allen. Hey! If you wanna be a good brother, tell her how the world works! Going out with me will be good for her in the long run!"

"Toneri," I said slowly, "I see you haven't learned your lesson."

"Caren just won't face facts! I'm gonna be clan chieftain someday!"

"Hm... I wouldn't be so sure about that."

This young wolf-clan man with hair of deepest brown was Toneri, the only son of Ogi, the current chieftain and head of the council. He

was half a head taller than me and a year older than Caren, although something about his face marked him as not yet an adult. He had been obsessed with my sister since we were children. It was hard to believe that he was the same age as the more composed Gil.

I also recognized the trio behind Toneri as the sons of prominent beastfolk leaders. That said, they included none of the Old Town clans—only the goats, weasels, and rats of New Town.

Toneri sneered. “That reminds me—you didn’t come home last winter.”

“Oh, well,” I replied. “A lot came up.”

“Ha! You think I don’t know you flunked your shot at the court sorcerers? I always knew humans were useless!” His friends joined him in a roar of laughter.

Hm. The chieftains must know that I failed my exam, but would they really spread the word...? Something doesn't seem quite right.

Toneri interrupted my musings with another cluck. “What, cat got your tongue? I bet you were feeling real full of yourself. Degrees from the academy and the university in hand, and set to join the court sorcerers too—all without a drop of noble blood in your veins. What a joke! I’ll be as good as a baron as soon as my father hands over the reins to me, and the rest of these guys have baronies or peerages in their futures too. We’re way out of your league!”

How cliché. I feel like I'm back at the Royal Academy.

“Mm... Not exactly original,” I replied with a derisive grin. “I can’t give you a passing grade for that.”

“What?!” The boy glared at me with clouded eyes. “A-Are you making fun of me?!”

“I shouldn’t have to tell you this, but the royal family is throwing its weight behind meritocracy in a big way,” I continued evenly, reflecting that time changed people for the worse as well as for the better.

“S-So what?!”

“So, formerly hereditary chieftaincies are no exception. Choosing the head of the council from among the wolf clan has been customary since the War of the Dark Lord, but I’m certain that will change too.”

Toneri was stunned. His flunkies gathered around him to complain.

“H-He’s fibbing, right?”

“Th-That’s not what you told us!”

“What about our shortcut to nobility?!”

Where had their confidence come from? Not a guarantee from old Duke Algren, surely.

“Shut up! Shut up!” the wolf-clan boy screamed, his eyes bloodshot. “You’re not even wolf clan! You’re human! Just some

nobody who doesn't even have a name! So shut your mouth about beastfolk politics! Plus, I heard you had the audacity to strike back at His Highness, the second prince, just because he bad-mouthed Caren, your pauper parents, and that scarlet witch! How could you put the whole clan at risk over a little thing like that?! If you wanna die, do it alone—like you were when they found you!”

He certainly has a mouth on him.

Before I could react, a murderous growl from behind me caught the boys off guard.

“Toneri...” Violet lightning charged with total animosity crackled around us as Caren stepped protectively in front of me. “Mocking Allen and our parents is the same as mocking me.”

“H-Hang on, C-Caren,” Toneri pleaded, quailing. “I... I was just thinking of the clan!”

Her violet lightning intensified. The crowd was abuzz, and even the music had begun to falter.

“What difference does that make?” my sister demanded fiercely. “Is your point that a member of our clan should roll over and submit to groundless insults to himself and his loved ones just because the words came from someone with a title? Would you say the same thing about *your* family?”

“I... I didn't mean that.” The boy struggled to excuse himself. “I got caught up in the moment and—”

“I'll *never* date anyone who talks like that!” At Caren's angry shout, people in the crowd started to pick up on what was happening and turn on the boys. Even the New Town beastfolk were against them. Toneri faltered, and those with him looked embarrassed.

I pushed past Caren.

“Allen?” she asked, startled.

I smiled at the boys. “Listen, Toneri.”

“Wh-What? I didn't say anything wro—” He yelped and retreated a step as I stared him in the eye and took a step forward. The other boys followed suit. I took another step, then two, while they all continued to back away. The rat-clan boy squeaked and toppled backward.

“Feel free to say whatever you like about me.” I stopped advancing, but their retreat continued. The fallen boy was in such a rush to scurry away that he didn't even bother to get up. “However...” I spread my arms, deploying dozens of elementary spells.

Toneri shrieked and fell down. “N-No way! I don't believe it!” he cried. “Th-There's no way you can pull off this kind of magic!”

Not all those years ago, I couldn't.

I glared at the boy and grabbed him by the collar. “Insulting her or my family is a different story. How did you describe it again? ‘A

little thing?’ I’d beat the prince black and blue as many times as it takes for that ‘little thing.’ Being willing to die for your family and the people you care about is a proud beastfolk tradition. My father taught me that. Didn’t yours teach you?”

The tall boy grunted as I hoisted him up. I heard cheers from the onlookers.

“So? What do you have to say for yourself?” I pressed.

“Y-You win,” Toneri conceded. “I... I was wrong.”

I released him, and he crumpled to the ground. The other boys were white as sheets and their teeth were chattering. What had become of the warlike beastfolk of yesteryear?

I dispelled my magic and turned to find Caren staring worriedly at me with her hands clasped to her chest. Her ears and tail looked larger than usual, and she was trembling from head to toe. Had I frightened her?

“Caren,” I called gently to her, “thank you for waiting.”

“A-Allen, I— Behind you!” she shouted.

Does he ever learn? I wondered, sensing an amateurish surge of mana and murderous rage.

Just then, I heard someone rush past me as an assortment of fruit-filled ice pops soared high into the air. Ellie let out a piercing shout as she charged up to Toneri and diverted the clumsy lightning spell he’d been preparing with a palm-heel strike to his right hand. She followed the blow with a flurry of dozens of punches and kicks, ending in an elbow that sent the boy flying—right into about a hundred intermediate spells of varied elements.

Headmaster, Tina, Lynne... It appears that I owe you all an apology.

I dismantled Ellie’s spells with a snap of my fingers, cast a levitation spell on Toneri, and caught the falling ice pops. The maid seemed intent on continuing her assault, so I also cast a wind spell that flung her into my arms, where she landed with a squeal.

“A-Allen, sir?” she said questioningly.

“Thank you, Ellie,” I replied. “I’m grateful, but...don’t you think that was a bit much?”

“But... But he tried to hurt you! I’ll keep you s-safe!”

She’s as adorable as ever, yet... Where did I go wrong? No! It’s not too late! I swear I’ll keep her and the saint of the north on the proper path!

While I was busy psyching myself up, a tiny Blizzard Wolf and Firebird materialized, surrounding the startled goat- and weasel-clan boys before they had a chance to flee. Tina and Lynne announced their return with cries of “You won’t be going anywhere!” and “Are you hurt, dear brother?” It appeared that they had learned some degree of control without the aid of their rod and sword, because they had their hands full with cotton candy. Both girls also wore masks on

the side of their heads—a wolf and a bird, respectively—and were giving me looks that said, “What did we tell you?”

I'm sorry I doubted you.

I released the yukata-clad maid and signaled with a glance for Tina and Lynne to dispel their magic. Once that was done, I went to my sister's side and gave her a pat on the head. She wore an expression that I had never seen on her before.

“Sorry I frightened you, Caren,” I said. “I suppose you don't like me anymore?”

She held her silence for a moment and then replied with a quiet, “You're such a fool.”

I had just begun stroking her head when several objects shot past us at high speed. They struck the hem of the rat-clan boy's yukata, pinning him to the ground—he had been trying to sneak off on his own.

Skewers...?

The boy's face contorted in terror as he passed out, foaming at the mouth.

I looked at the source of the improvised projectiles and saw, to my exasperation, that Lydia was busy licking the fingers of her free right hand while holding several skewers of meat in her left. She had evidently started enjoying the festival without us.



She cast a glance at the crowd. "There's nothing to see here. Just Allen, back from giving up his shot at becoming a court sorcerer to defend the honor of the wolf clan and, by extension, the beastfolk as a whole. Ask your chieftains for the particulars." Her offhand summary landed like a bombshell.

"L-Lydia!" I exclaimed, anxious to prevent any further revelations.

She ignored me—confirming my suspicion that she knew *exactly* what she was doing—and cast a disdainful look at the fallen boys before instantly closing the distance to my side. "And while you're at it," she added, "tell those numbskulls' parents that chieftaincies will cease to be hereditary in the near future."

"We don't give a hoot about succession rights and all that, Scarlet Lass," came a hoarse yet carrying shout from the crowd. "Mind answering a question about something that matters?"

A white-haired and white-tailed old otter emerged from the circle of onlookers. To my dismay, I recognized Deg, the former otter-clan chieftain.

I simply must stop—

Caren clapped a hand over my mouth, and the girls stood on tiptoes to assist her.

Lydia took the opportunity to ignore my muffled cries and say, "What would you like to know?" to the otter.

"I heard through the grapevine that standing up for us cost Allen his chance to be a court sorcerer," Deg replied. "Is it true? The sitting chieftains know, but they ain't telling."

O-Oh no! This is my last—

"Don't move a muscle," Caren whispered, seizing my left arm in a viselike grip.

"It's true!" Tina, Ellie, and Lynne proudly exclaimed in unison.

"And there you have it," Lydia added.

Silence fell over the plaza. Even the music stopped. Then, there came a cheer that shook the ground. Everyone began to shout at once.

"Bring booze! Break out the good stuff!"

"Don't skimp on the food!"

"Somebody go tell everyone who stayed home! We should all be celebrating this!"

"We're gonna need more food and drink stalls! Set 'em up!"

New booths went up one after another, assisted by a variety of spells. But the plaza was already set up for the festival! What more could they need?!

"What do you have planned?" Lydia asked Deg without regard for my distress.

The old otter guffawed, his wrinkled face splitting into a broad

grin. "You have to ask? Allen is family, and he gave up on his dream for us. We couldn't call ourselves beastfolk if we didn't thank him. This calls for a party—no, a massive feast!"

"Oh?" Lydia replied. "I like the way you think. It's in your hands."
"Leave it to me!"

I groaned. I could see it all now—this was the albatross's revenge for my chat with Tina the night before. Her eyes said, "Remember, infidelity is a serious offense." If you asked me, her whole argument was built on sand.

Caren rested her head on my chest and murmured, "They would have found out eventually, Allen." Meanwhile, Tina, Ellie, and Lynne were standing tall and looking positively elated.

Oh well.

Toneri and his entourage had slipped away while I wasn't looking. I suspected that some odd ideas were spreading through the younger generation.

*

Dear Mr. Allen,

This is Stella. Well, I suppose you already know that, since I wrote my name on the envelope. I've never written to you before, so I suppose I'm still a little nervous.

How are you? Every day has been lovely here—summer is the most pleasant season of the year in the north. I believe that the professor plans to join us as soon as his work is done.

My father and Graham were waiting to meet me on the platform at Central Station in the northern capital. I was at a loss for words—I never knew how difficult deciding what to say could be. Would you believe that Graham was in tears? Then he set off Shelley, and she started weeping too. I've been slowly learning to speak with my father.

I couldn't have done any of it without you. Thank you so much. But, to be honest, I wish that you had come with me. I don't think I would have been nearly this nervous if you had. My time at home has been even more exhausting than the royal capital, if you can believe it. I realize that I'm being unreasonable, but...but if only I had you by my side...

I hope that Tina and Ellie aren't causing you any trouble. You seemed gloomy during our last few days in the royal capital, so I worry that you might be under too much strain—especially given how good you are at hiding things. At the same time, the letters I received from them the other day made it sound like you've been having so much fun that I couldn't help feeling envious.

I would have loved to give your parents my thanks too. Would you believe it, Tina and Ellie have the nerve to write, "Mother is such a warm, charming person! Father is so dashing!" It really isn't fair.

If I wouldn't be a burden, I'd like to spend my next long vacation there with all of you. May I please? I've solved all the homework problems you assigned me.

I look forward to our next meeting. Till my next letter.

Yours truly,

Stella

(So spoiled every day that she's at her wits' end.)

PS: The Yustinian Empire's southern army will soon be conducting major exercises along our northern border. That's what their envoys were in the royal capital to announce, apparently. The lack of a clear reason for the drill makes my father and Graham suspicious. I thought you ought to know.

Chapter 3

The sixth day of my visit arrived before I knew it, and despite my initial unease, I soon settled into the house where I had spent all thirteen years of my life before the Royal Academy. To my relief, the girls had taken to it as well. The sight of the three of them napping together in the afternoons came as a comfort—my mother had even joined them the day before. As for the festival, where the albatross had ensnared me... It didn't bear remembering. I resolved never to sing in public again.

After breakfast, I retired to a wide-open room with a view of the inner courtyard, where I swayed in a rocking chair while perusing Stella's letter. Her neat, regular handwriting and the faint aroma of flowers had a soothing effect. She had picked up on my moodiness and seemed to be sulking as well, so I decided that I ought to take her out somewhere when next we met. The royal capital's bazaar, perhaps?

So, the empire is staging military exercises along our border as well.

I gazed at the Great Tree in the distance and the cloudless sky behind it. Such a gorgeous day might suit some fun with the girls.

A few days prior, a red griffin had delivered an envelope from Felicia. It had contained an order for casks of that red wine I'd sent her along with a hastily scribbled note: "Fat knight in green at my parents' place. Maybe tied to the Algrens. I told them not to get involved. It's sweltering! I want to go for those sweet ice things! Mr...and I can have half each, then swap."

One word in her last sentence had evidently been erased with some roughness.

Still, a knight in green? That was the color of the Lebuferas from the west. Algren retainers, incidentally, wore purple. Only one noble family had migrated from west to east since the War of the Dark Lord—the same family that had aroused such hatred from the beastfolk over a decade ago and then supposedly fled to the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit.

I need more information, I decided, staring at the note. Felicia had probably meant to enclose a letter—I would have to tease her about her carelessness on my return!

Suddenly, my vision blurred. I turned to find a platinum-haired girl standing behind me. "Tina, aren't these my dad's glasses?" I asked.

After a brief silence, she merely said, "Perfect."

I wondered what she could mean as I reached to remove the spectacles. They wouldn't budge—a girl dressed in pale red and another in pale green were restraining me.

"Lynne? Ellie?" I said. "Would you please let go? I can't see very well."

"If you're worried about blurred vision, switch to these," the albatross interjected from a short distance away before tossing something to Tina.

"Lydia, why do you have something like this?" Tina asked. "Don't tell me—"

"I'll call mother and Caren, so make it quick." The albatross then left the room, evading the attempt to question her.

No sooner had I removed my dad's glasses and set them on the round table in front of me than Tina placed a new pair on my face. These lacked any optical correction. Before I could rebuke my students, they formed a row, looked up at me, and asked:

"What do you think, sir?"

"A-Allen, sir, um..."

"Does it suit me, dear brother?"

"Where did you three get those outfits?" I responded.

The girls were dressed in jinbei, the short-sleeved jackets and knee-length trousers popular among the beastfolk of the eastern capital during the summer months. Tina's outfit was pale azure with a design of six-petaled flowers, Ellie's pale green with several little birds, and Lynne's beautifully patterned. The clothes looked so new that they must have been tailored in the royal capital before our departure—another sign of the head maids' influence.

"Oh my goodness. Forgetting to compliment a lady will lose you points, Allen." My mom giggled as she entered the room. She had probably been with Lydia and Ellie, making lunches.

I fiddled with the temples of my spectacles to calm my nerves and said, "You all look lovely."

"Thank you!" the trio replied as they joined hands in delight.

My sister and the albatross followed my mom into the room, looking somewhat miffed. Caren wore short sleeves and shorts, while her hands clutched an unremarkable cloth bag. Lydia had on a light, long-sleeved hempen jacket over a white shirt and a long scarlet skirt. A straw hat perched on her head, and she carried a cloth bag marked with a charming design of a bird as well as a wicker lunch box.

"Is the grand unveiling over?" the albatross asked me with a smile.

"Lydia," I replied, "I take it that Anna, Mrs. Walker, and you had a hand in this?"

“Who can say? Mother, may I help you to prepare dinner again tonight? I promise that we’ll be back in time.”

“Of course, dear. I’ve always dreamed of cooking with my daughter. Have a hug!” My mom threw her arms around Lydia, and the noblewoman responded in kind.

The girls no longer found these displays surprising. I was comforted to see them cheerfully showing off their new clothes to one another.

Once my mom released Lydia, she turned to the trio and said, “Now, let’s get you girls ready to go too. Did you bring bathing suits?”

“Yes!” came the chorus of replies as the girls held up wicker bags.

What did mom just say? Bathing suits?

She was in the process of leading the girls away when Caren intervened with a blunt “Hold on.” Meanwhile, Lydia seated herself across from me with a half-lidded glare that said, “So, you fancy little girls, do you?”

Wh-What a thing to say!

“Yes, Caren? What is it?” my mom said in a singsong tone.

“You know what!” Caren snapped. She then balled up her fists, puffed up her cheeks, and muttered, “Mom, um, about my yukata...”

Just like the old days, I thought as her words trailed off into silence.

The albatross was wholly devoted to capturing my likeness on a video orb. “Don’t move,” her gaze seemed to say. “And don’t leave the house with those glasses on!” Sometimes, she baffled me.

My mom took Caren aside and whispered in her ear. “Don’t worry. It’ll be ready for you when you get back.”

Caren perked up. “Thank you so much,” she whispered in response.

They get along so well. Which reminds me—I need to ask her something before we set out.

“Mom, do you have a yukata for me too?” I said, rising to my feet.

“Hm... I’m not sure,” she replied. “You’ve grown quite a bit, you know.” She stood on tiptoe and gave me a pat on the head with evident delight.

True. My old yukata won’t fit me any— Oh!

The girls were watching the role reversal with broad grins and chirps of “Sir!” “Ooh!” and “Splendid, dear brother!” Lydia wore a faint smile as well and continued recording. Only Caren paid no attention; she was off in her own world, blushing slightly and wagging her tail.

I waved my hand and got back on topic. “I-In that case, what about one of dad’s?”

“I’ll make you a new one, but you’ll have to do without this year.

Look forward to next summer!" my mom replied, beaming. That was her way of telling me that I'd better visit home again.

"Should I take the girls to see Dag?" I asked, scratching my cheek as I tried to change the subject. "I assume they want to play in the water."

"Ha ha! I'm glad that my son is so quick on the uptake!"

I recalled the old otter-clan man; although his speech could be a little rough, he was caring and fond of children. He hadn't had much to do with humans in the past decade or so on account of the incident, but I had visited him with Lydia before, so I foresaw no problems.

I smiled at the girls, who had been attentively watching me converse with my mom. "In that case," I said, "gather by the front door once you're ready, and we'll go down to the water. I'll show you a secret spot that not even most beastfolk know about."



Although the city had long been famed as the "forest capital," I preferred to think of it as the "labyrinth of waterways." Hundreds—maybe thousands—of canals of all sizes stretched over the eastern capital like a net. The beastfolk had always lived on the blessing of water bestowed by the Great Tree and the dense forests on the city's outskirts.

"Look, sir!" the platinum-haired girl cried, leaning over the side of the bridge and pointing at the water. "That fish swimming by is *huge*!"

"Be careful, Tina," I chided her. "Can you swim?"

"Humph! O-Of course! I can do anything!"

"What?" Ellie asked, holding her straw hat in place. "I d-didn't know you learned to swim, Lady Tina."

"Ellie, shush!"

Lynne ignored the exchange between mistress and maid. "I can't swim, dear brother," she said. "Would you kindly teach me the basics?" Her request drew startled looks from her fellow students and a piercing glare from her willful elder sister.

"You hate swimming, Lynne," the latter reminded her.

"D-Dear sisterrr..."

Lydia, who stood beside Caren, was shading herself with a parasol despite the matching straw hats we all wore.

The western edge of the city, where we were walking, was the oldest area of Old Town. Its residents generally had deep roots in the district.

As we stepped off the bridge and our destination came into view, the girls clutched at my sleeves and exclaimed in surprise and delight. At least a dozen gondolas in assorted hues were moored in a neat row along the wharf. These distinctive crafts of Old Town's otter-clan

ferryman were apparently a legacy of their ancestors in the city of water. The New Town beastfolk favored skiffs.

I descended the somewhat steep wooden stairs built onto the side of the canal ahead of the others and then extended a hand to assist the girls. "Come down one at a time," I said. "The steps creak, but they're sturdy."

"All right!" the trio replied.

Once the younger girls were down, Caren followed without taking my hand. Her silence didn't seem to indicate displeasure, but she had been acting oddly for the past few days.

The albatross was the last to descend. She patiently waited her turn, then held out her basket and folded parasol, which I took and enchanted to hover beside me. No sooner was that done than she leapt into my arms.

"Must we do this every year?" I complained.

"Absolutely," she replied. "Any less would be a dereliction of duty. Or would you rather trade places?"

I shrugged and returned her belongings. I sensed icy stares from my students, but Caren held her peace.

Lydia shot me a look—she had apparently picked up on my sister's strange behavior too. I nodded, indicating that I would seek an opportunity to walk and talk with Caren alone.

The otter-clan men chatting near the gondolas waved as soon as they spotted Lydia and me, so I returned the gesture.

"Sir!" Tina exclaimed. "It's unfair! Unjust! Do it again! I demand a do-over!"

"No."

"Ooh! You're so mean!" Her vexation immediately gave way to curiosity. "Now, which boat will we be taking?" she asked, tugging on my right sleeve. Ellie's and Lynne's interest appeared to be getting the better of them as well, while Lydia and Caren casually moved toward the canal.

"It's over there," I replied. "Follow me, and stay away from the water."

The trio voiced their assent in unison and seized possession of my right arm—not exactly what I'd had in mind. I led them to the end of a broad landing, where a beastfolk man sat aboard a gondola that was both notably older and better cared for than the rest, dangling a fishing line into the water. His hair, which poked out from beneath his woven wicker hat, was entirely white, as was his tail, and he wore a navy-blue jinbei.

"You're humans, ain't you? All but *two* of you. I can tell by your footsteps," he announced bluntly. "Sorry, but I ain't ferried more humans than I can count on my fingers these past ten years or more.

Go try someone else 'fore you scare off the fish."

The girls gave me worried looks, so I patted each of them on the top of her straw hat.

"Is that so, Dag? What a shame," I said. "Come along, girls; we'll find another gondola."

"Hm? Hold your horses," he called just as I began ushering the girls away.

I turned, and we grinned at each other. "I'd be happy to. It's been a long time, but I'm glad to see you look well."

He roared with laughter. "You don't look so bad yourself, Allen!"

"I owe that to my bullying—ahem, *training*—at the hands of a duke's unreasonable daughter."

"You don't say. Scarlet Lass, is he making himself useful?"

"More or less," Lydia replied, "although I could do without his rebellious streak."

More guffaws greeted this pronouncement. "Glad to see you haven't changed." The short, old beastfolk man—Dag of the otter clan—stood up with a loud grunt of exertion, seized his oar, and took his place in the stern. He looked just like his twin brother, Deg.

"Hop aboard," Dag said with a jerk of his chin. "I can guess where you're headed. Oh, you girls wait a sec. Allen."

"Of course." I boarded the gondola and set down our bags. After a moment's consideration, I called, "Ellie."

"Y-Yessir."

"Would you join me for a training exercise? I'll demonstrate."

Ellie squeaked as I cast a levitation spell on her and gently lowered her into the gondola.

"Now you try it," I said.

The maid was stiff as a board. "A-Allen, sir, I think m-moving people would be dery vifficult. Oh, um..."

"Don't worry. Tina and Lynne are great swimmers, so they'll be fine even if you drop them." My reassurance seemed to disconcert the young ladies in question.

"Y-You're right," Ellie replied. "I've got n-nothing to worry about!" A malicious grin spread across her face.

I suppose this has its charms as— No! I mustn't encourage her fall from grace!

"Get on with it, Allen," Dag interjected. He would need to wait a moment.

Ellie's fellow students joined hands and began to fuss.

"S-Sir!" Tina cried. "I don't think it's safe to let Ellie do it alone!"

"D-Dear brother! I daresay our safety and peace of mind should take priority!" Lynne added.

What to do? The pair were hilarious, but Lydia and Caren were

beginning to get fed up, so I took Ellie's left hand.

"A-Allen, sir?" the maid asked.

"I'll move them," I said. "Try to get a feel for the spell."

Ellie earnestly observed my spell formulae while I levitated Tina, Lynne, and Caren into the gondola. *I ought to jot it down in her notebook later*, I thought as I shot a look at Lydia. The albatross leapt off the landing without making a sound, landed upright in the middle of the boat, seated herself on a cushion, and unfurled her parasol.

I released Ellie's hand and turned back to Dag. "Thank you for waiting. We're ready to leave now."

"All righty. Hang on tight, girls." The old otter plied his oar, and the gondola slid slowly out into the canal.

The Great Tree loomed gigantically over our heads as we glided along. At this distance, I could see that part of its trunk was a different color.

Once we caught the current, Dag grew more talkative. "That was a hell of a party," he said. "Still, I hear you went and kicked another hornet's nest. Ain't that right, Allen?"

"I value consistency," I replied.

"Oh, do you now?" He guffawed. "Whoa there!" With a mighty sweep of his oar, he propelled us into a narrow old waterway. He pulled out his pipe as we slowed to a more leisurely pace, making for an even smoother voyage. "Now, I might as well learn the little ladies' names."

I nodded and pointed to my students, who were in the rear seats, marveling at the fish darting under the water's surface and the nearby scenery. "I'll introduce you. From where you're standing, the girl on the right is Tina, the one next to her is Ellie, and that's Lynne on the left. I'm their private tutor."

The trio turned to call cheerful greetings.

"I'm Tina Howard!"

"E-Ellie Walker, at your service. Oh, um..."

"I am Lynne Leinster. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The old otter stood stunned for a moment, his pipe between his lips. Then he groaned, "You've gotta be kidding me." He apparently recognized the significance of the girls' surnames—hardly surprising, given that he had once been at the center of clan politics alongside Deg. A flick of a fire spellstone ignited a small flame in the bowl of his pipe—one which went out almost immediately. I shifted my gaze to Lydia and saw that she had one index finger raised. I had almost forgotten how much she detested smoking.

Dag looked at me and burst into a hearty laugh. "Ain't the Scarlet Lass enough for you, Allen? Well?"

“There are extenuating circumstances,” I replied sheepishly. “A lot of them, in fact.”

“That so? Sounds like you’ve got it rough, Scarlet Lass. And you too, little Caren. My heart goes out to you.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll just take a stricter hand with him,” Lydia replied.

Caren echoed her sentiment with a blunt “My brother needs discipline.”

Apparently, I had even harsher treatment in my future.

The entrance to a pitch-dark tunnel came into view ahead of us. I spied the Algren crest and the insignia of the Church of the Holy Spirit on the wall of the canal—neither had been present the year before.

The girls began preparing lights.

“You won’t need those,” I told them, to their evident confusion. “Bringing in outside light would be tactless.”

The gondola plunged into the tunnel, the walls of which soon began to glow with a faint, green light. Tina let out a cry of admiration, matched by an impressed “A-Amazing” from Ellie and a stunned “M-My goodness” from Lynne. I noted that no crests marred the mystical display.

“Sir! These are positively ancient spell formulae, aren’t they?!” Tina demanded, bursting with excitement.

Dag smiled. “Oh? You interested in these old relics, young lady?”

“Absolutely!”

“I-It’s so intricate...” Ellie added.

“Doesn’t it remind you of my dear brother’s formulae?” Lynne asked.

The old otter laughed. “Well, I’ll be. You show promise. This place goes back ages—long before the kingdom. I’ve been rowing gondolas longer than anyone else in the city, and I still don’t know how far it goes. Any greenhorn who wandered in here hoping to satisfy their curiosity would get lost for certain and maybe never make it back.”

“Uh, um... Have these spell formulae been here all that time?” Ellie asked.

I found her show of interest unexpectedly touching. Then I realized, to my shock, that Lydia was recording me from behind her book. I hadn’t prepared for such devious behavior.

Dag shook his head. “Nope. These are a bit more recent. About five hundred years at the outside. I don’t know the details myself, but when I was a youngster, my great grandpa told me...”

“Y-Yes?” three voices urged.

“He told me that one person constructed all these spells—with the elementals’ help.”

The girls’ eyes widened.

“That’s just a folktale,” Caren interjected. “Don’t fill their heads with nonsense, Dag. They’re my younger schoolmates *and* my students, so I’m doubly responsible for them.”

The old otter laughed. “You loved to listen to my stories yourself when you were littler.”

“Y-Yes, but...only because Allen used to believe them.”

“I *still* believe them,” I noted.

With a snap of my fingers, I intervened in the spell formulae—which bore a family resemblance to botanical magic. My students let out awestruck exclamations as the lights flared brighter. I took the opportunity to question Dag about a matter that had been bothering me; the former deputy chieftain was always well informed.

“I noticed Algren and Holy Spirit insignias on the wall of the canal,” I whispered.

“Some lackeys of the duke’s idiot sons must’ve done it while we weren’t looking,” he replied. “Old Algren’s not a bad sort, so he must be in pretty bad shape to be letting ’em get away with this.”

“The old duke is ill?” I asked, startled.

The septuagenarian Duke Guido Algren—“the old duke,” as he was often called—ruled the kingdom’s eastern lands. He was also the father of Gil Algren, my friend from university.

The otter bit down on his unlit pipe. “I don’t know the particulars. He used to visit the beastfolk districts, but no one’s seen him these past few months.”

I took a moment to process that. “Who will succeed him?”

“What do I care? As long as they honor the Old Pledge, we won’t complain.” Dag paused, then added, “Still, those fool boys of his bear watching. They’ve got some wrongheaded notions about what happened in the War of the Dark Lord that night— Whoa!” He pulled on his oar as the exit came into view up ahead.

“Sudden daylight can be blinding,” I warned the girls. “Shut your eyes and then open them slowly.”

The gondola slid gracefully out of the underground tunnel and onto the placid surface of a lake. High cliffs, surmounted by a canopy of dense foliage, surrounded us on three sides. Even the single entrance was narrow and chiseled in a way that suggested that the spot had once been fully enclosed. Schools of small fish, swimming with the gentle currents, were clearly visible through the crystalline waters. This hidden island on the outskirts of the eastern capital was a well-kept secret, even among the beastfolk. Save for a simple hut erected by Dag and some other locals, there wasn’t a man-made structure in sight.

“Thank you very much,” I told Dag as I carried our bags out onto

the white, sandy beach. Tina, Ellie, and Lynne loudly echoed my sentiment as they hopped out of the gondola after me. Delighted cries followed as their feet hit the water.

Caren disembarked without my help and swiftly joined the girls. Then came Lydia, who once again leapt into my arms while her parasol and basket hovered to one side.

“You could easily have reached the shore,” I pointed out.

“Perhaps,” she replied. “We may never know.”

My excited students took no notice of us as they pelted Dag with questions.

“What’s this place called?”

“Uh... Are any of the fishies here, um, dangerous?”

“Should we be aware of any sharp drop-offs or strong currents?”

The white-haired old otter guffawed. “There are tasty fish here, but none you need to worry about. This whole area’s one big shoal, and the currents are gentle. And it’s called, uh...” He faltered.

“It has no formal name, but I call it Atra Island,” I said, speaking in reference to a genuine vow. Caren looked at me, and I nodded in turn. We wouldn’t forget our childhood friend.

Dag muttered under his breath that he’d need to remember that as he pointed his little craft back the way we had come. He then turned to me and hollered, “All set! I’ll be back for you all this evening! Awful bold of you to stay out here with five ladies and one man!”

“Care to trade places?” I replied.

“Not on your life. The missus would fillet me if she found out. Take it easy, now.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. See you later. And girls, you’ve got my permission to make trouble for him!”

“Thank you! We will!” Tina, Ellie, and Lynne shouted back.

Dag raised one arm in response and then set off toward the underground waterway.

“Dag!” I shouted, tossing a bottle of red wine from my bag at his retreating back.

“Hm? Wh-Whoa!”

“Drink it with your wife. I can vouch for its taste.”

Dag laughed as he secured his grip on the bottle. “Thanks kindly,” he replied, holding it carefully as he skillfully rowed his gondola out of sight.

I flashed a smile at the girls. “Now, let’s get changed into our bathing suits. Don’t forget your sunscreen.”



A quick spell raised a wall of sand, behind which I changed into

my bathing suit—an unremarkable pair of shorts—and a white short-sleeved shirt, which I wore unbuttoned. That done, I spread out a cloth on the beach and planted the large umbrella we had brought to shade us from the sun. I also inflated a pair of wolf-cub-patterned swim rings for Tina and Lynne.

The albatross and company were changing inside the hut. I would need to fetch a table and chairs from it once they were finished; I was certain that a dedicated hobbyist like Dag would keep it well furnished.

Wild sea-green griffins—longer necked than the everyday postal variety—soared gracefully through the skies above. I recalled coming across one in the forest as a child, and what a beautiful creature it had been. I ought to share such experiences with my students now that—

The sound of running feet trampling the sand interrupted my thoughts.

“Sir!”

“Dear brother!”

Sure enough, it was Tina and Lynne. Both girls were concealing themselves with white towels.

“You’re changed already? That was fast,” I said.

“W-We are,” the young noblewomen replied, excited yet evidently nervous. Nevertheless, they soon steeled themselves and whipped off their towels—a bold gesture that instinctively made me cover my eyes.

“Look, sir!” Tina shouted, challenge in her voice. “Isn’t mine cuter than Lynne’s?!”

“Be truthful, dear brother,” Lynne added in the same tone. “Tell her that mine is prettier.”

I uncovered my eyes and then chuckled in spite of myself. Meanwhile, both girls gave me confused looks.

“Sir?”

“Dear brother?”

“I always knew you were good friends,” I said.

The pair blinked in surprise at my assessment, then looked at each other and got a shock.

“Lynne, how could you?!” Tina exclaimed. At almost the same moment, Lynne cried, “Tina, how could you?!” Tina wore a white and azure bathing suit with a frilly top and a short skirt. Lynne’s was pale red, but the cut was identical.

“Did you buy them at the same store?” I asked.

“W-We did...” Tina admitted. “Ellie was with us too. I worked so hard to keep it a secret all this time!”

“H-How mortifying...” Lynne added. “Miss First Place, how did we end up picking the same one after giving it so much thought?!”

“You look charming,” I assured them. “Why not admit that you’re glad you match?”

“W-We are not!” they shouted in unison. Even their protests were identical. I wished that they would be more open with each other.

Then more footfalls, rapid yet hesitant, crossed the sand toward us. “Um, uh... A-Allen, sir...” their owner stammered.

“Ellie, are you ready for—” The words died on my lips. Unlike those of her classmates, the maid’s pale-green polka-dot bathing suit was cut for an adult woman.

“U-Um, well... The s-store clerk recommended this one, but I’m n-not sure how I look in it,” Ellie said, fidgeting as she approached me.

I cleared my throat. “Rest assured, you look lovely.”

“Th-Thank you so much! Huh? L-Lady Tina? L-Lady Lynne?” The two young noblewomen seized the maid by the hands and dragged her down to the shoreline. There, they began warm-up exercises—making a point to face the water.

It was then that Caren arrived to rebuke me. “You shouldn’t ogle her, Allen.”

“I’d like to think I wasn’t,” I replied, somewhat defensively.

My sister’s new pale-violet bathing suit was designed for ease of movement, with shorts for bottoms and almost no extraneous decoration.

“You look nice too, Caren,” I added, responding to her darting glances at me.

“Is that all?” Her ears and tail betrayed anticipation.

“I take it that suit comes from the same store as the necklace I gave you for your birthday?” I whispered in her ear as I passed her a swim ring. “The little butterfly mark embroidered on the shorts is a dead giveaway.”

“P-Pure coincidence.” Caren spotted the girls watching us. “What are you looking at?” she demanded, striding off toward the startled trio with a swim ring in each hand. She was both an attentive teacher and a better swimmer than me, so I opted to leave Tina and Lynne in her capable hands.

Finally, I sensed the albatross approaching.

“What an awful fuss.”

“Do you think so?” I asked. “I enjoyed our last visit with just the three of us, but I’m also fond of—” I turned and then immediately lowered my gaze.

Lydia gave me a puzzled look. “What’s gotten into— Oh, *I see*.”

“W-Wait! Give me a moment!”

Despite my protests, the scarlet-haired noblewoman advanced on me step by step.

Lydia was beautiful. Her swimsuit was not red, but white. The rest

of her ensemble consisted of her straw hat on her head and a long scarlet pareu around her waist.

The albatross giggled as she pressed her smirking face close to mine. "You don't deal well with this sort of thing, do you?" she said. "Now, praise me! Don't be shy!"

"Th-That's playing dirty!" I complained. "This is what makes you such a bad sport, Lady Lydia Leinster!"

"You can do better than that."

I groaned. The albatross noticed me blushing and grew ever more triumphant. At last, I had no choice but to—

Tina let out a shout. "Lydia! What do you think you're doing?!"

The girls had noticed. I was saved!

Lydia clicked her tongue loudly and fixed me with her intensely sullen glare. I shrugged, steeled myself, and whispered in her ear, "I think you look gorgeous."

"H-Humph! Well, that wasn't too bad." Then, probably to mask her embarrassment, she shouted, "Tiny! Today's the day I teach you your place!" She stalked off toward the young noblewoman in the wolf-cub swim ring. I followed, fanning my cheeks.

I wish she would stop springing things on me like that. My heart can't take it.

I sat in a wicker chair, endeavoring to think calmly. This was, after all, a gathering of some of the kingdom's finest sorceresses and swordswomen. They had contented themselves with playing around in the water at first, but...

As I surveyed the scene before me, I reflected that some variation on this outcome might have been inevitable.

Tina and Lynne fired dozens of ice shots and fireballs, crying, "I've got you now!" and "Have at you, dear sister!" Their target, Lydia, stood calmly at the water's edge and dispatched their salvos with a single, bladelike sweep of her arm.

"H-H-How is that even possible?!" Tina fumed in dismay.

Lynne groaned. "Y-You're even stronger than usual, d-dear sister."

"No," the albatross replied, "you're just weak."

Both girls looked up, incensed, and began deploying spells with both hands.

Lydia yawned and turned her attention to Caren, who was on the other side of her. "Victory doesn't come to those who wait," she taunted. "I'll be sitting next to him at lunch for certain."

"In your dreams, maybe! I'll protect my brother!" Caren deployed and then activated blasts of lightning. Unlike the girls, she mixed instantaneous and delayed spells, although she didn't employ Lightning Apotheosis or advanced magic. This was still a game, the

goal of which was to make Lydia use offensive magic within the time limit. Only elementary spells were permitted, and barriers tuned to resist each element were in place to preserve the beach from harm. The winner would earn the right to sit beside me at lunch, or so I gathered.

The albatross intervened in and dismantled Caren's spells, provoking a stunned "B-But that's Allen's trick!" from my sister.

"You don't honestly believe he would hide his techniques from me, do you?" Lydia replied.

This time, the girls joined in Caren's shock. Of course, Lydia hadn't been entirely truthful; I did share all my knowledge and skill with her, but that didn't mean she had mastered *all* my tricks.

I passed my eyes over three floating spell formulae and a sheet of notepaper that Anna had handed me at Central Station in the royal capital. A teapot and a large wicker basket rested on the round table.

"Allen, sir, would you care for a cup?" Ellie asked, offering me the iced black tea she had gone to the hut to brew. She had donned a white shirt over her bathing suit.

"Yes, please," I replied. "Are you certain you don't want to join the others?"

"Y-Yessir. Brewing your tea is enough for me. E-Especially since I'm borrowing your sh-shirt." The maid giggled bashfully. I avoided looking directly at her—the combination of my shirt and her bathing suit was more than my eyes could bear.

I took a sip from my glass. Ellie had made excellent use of temperature control in cooling the tea and had even thought to add ice cubes. "Delicious."

"Thank you," she replied. "Even grandma has been complimenting my tea lately."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised if the Leinsters' head maid offered you a job one of these days."

"Oh, um..." Ellie laughed nervously.

"I see my warning came too late. Forgive me." The ever-efficient Anna had apparently already attempted to recruit young Miss Walker.

My note from the head maid read: "Possible breakthrough in the case of Duchess Rosa Howard due to doubt cast on her lineage. Despite a meticulous cover-up, it has become apparent that she did not descend from the Earls of Coalheart, an extinct western house, but was rather an adopted daughter. Signs point to tacit consent from the royal family. Further particulars to follow."

The plot thickens.

I reached for my glass only to have it snatched from under my nose. "Lydia, that's mine," I said pointedly.

"Meaning it belongs to me," the albatross replied. "Ellie."

“Y-Yes’m?!”

“Tiny and Lynne are calling for you. They say they’re going to practice swimming. We’ve made lunch together, so I’ll overlook your attempt to cut ahead of me, but take off that shirt!”

“Y-Yes’m!” The maid removed and carefully folded my shirt before leaving it on the table. Then, she raced off to assist the two dukes’ daughters, to whom Caren was teaching the fundamentals of swimming.

The albatross sat down across from me and continued drinking my tea.

“How were the girls?” I asked.

“So-so,” she replied. “They don’t measure up to me, although they haven’t done badly, considering that they’ve only had a little more than half a year with you.”

“I take it they’re making good progress, then. It’s a joy to see my students grow.”

I was feeling peckish, so I took one egg sandwich from the basket to nibble on. The albatross kept her gaze fixed on me all the while.

“You do realize you’re making it difficult to eat?” I eventually complained.

“Is it good?” she asked, ignoring my remark.

Of course it was good; I would recognize my mother’s cooking anywhere.

“Well, yes,” I said. “Caren and I grew up eating— Lydia?” The albatross had turned her back to me—chair and all—and was clenching her fist in triumph.

What in the world...?

I slipped Anna’s note into my shirt pocket and set about refining the spell formulae—or tried to. Lydia sitting with her legs drawn up and scrutinizing my every move was quite distracting.

“Why don’t you go for a swim too?” I suggested.

“No. I’m refueling.”

“How so?”

Her dainty fingers traced my spell formulae. “This is the headmaster’s teleportation spell, isn’t it? And is this for encryption? The last one is just a fragment.”

“I’ve seen it so many times. Casting it is beyond me, but I bet that you could do it. I’ll tell you about the other two once they’re finished.”

“Mm...”

Time passed peacefully. Out on the lake, although still near enough for the girls’ feet to touch the bottom, Caren was teaching Tina and Lynne to swim with their rings. I overheard frustrated groans of “C-Caren” and “P-People simply weren’t meant to float.”

“Yes, they were. Just look at Ellie.” My sister pointed to the maid, who was out in the open water, swimming long-distance.

“Lady Tina! Lady Lynne! Come join me!” Ellie called, waving. Her innocent invitation silenced her classmates.

“Very well,” Caren said with a faraway look in her eyes. “Let’s say that your chests are the reason you can’t learn to swim. Are you really willing to accept that?”

“N-Never!” was the unanimous response.

“Good. I swear I’ll get you swimming!”

I might question Caren’s methods, but she had managed to motivate the girls.

“You know,” the albatross murmured, “my birthday is next month.”

Oh. Is that what’s been on her mind?

“I’ve kept my schedule free,” I assured her.

“Thanks.” Lydia’s response was curt, and she buried her face in her knees as soon as it left her mouth. The nape of her neck was scarlet.

“You’ll be the older one again,” I commented, watching Tina and Lynne resolutely flutter their legs.

“Naturally. I’m older than you, and you ought to respect your elders!”

“I suppose my elders don’t need pampering.”

“Not so fast.” Lydia walked over, plunked herself down beside me, and immediately seized my left hand for herself. “You don’t pamper me *nearly* enough. I could work so much harder if you did.”

“Yes, yes. Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Only one ‘yes!’” she snapped. “And you’d better get enough food, rest, and sleep as well.”

“I’ll, um, d-do my best.”

Lydia pouted. “What an unendearing servant you are. Perhaps I really should run off to the city of water with you.”

“We’re closer to the Lalannoy Republic,” I pointed out.

“At least *try* to be sweet,” she muttered sullenly, rubbing her head against me. Whatever would I do with this noblewoman?

An odd presence overhead alerted me that something was falling toward us. I looked up to see a...furball? No; it was frantically flapping its little wings. That said, it was no bird. With the aid of a levitation spell from me, the squirming creature landed on our umbrella.

Lydia and I stood up to take a look and exclaimed appreciatively at what we found. The round, fluffy creature on our umbrella was a sea-green griffin chick. Tiny wings protruded from the gorgeous azure and emerald fur of its back. The young beast’s golden eyes stared blankly at us.

“Such a young griffin ought to have a parent nearby,” I said. “Perhaps it fell off in mid-flight?”

I cast a levitation spell around the umbrella, just to be safe. I wouldn’t touch the chick. Griffins were intelligent creatures, but some wild species abhorred the scent of people, so—

The furball hopped off the umbrella and into my arms, where it purred contentedly. I resumed my seat, confused, but the baby animal stayed put.

The albatross sat down as well, then immediately turned to one side, muttering under her breath. “What a good fit. They look perfect together. Is this how it’ll be when we have kids to— Wait. He does look good, but that’s supposed to be my spot. Will our children take it from me? But when it comes to children, should I really be...”

“Lydia?”

“It’s nothing. More tea!”

“Coming right up.” I conjured chunks of ice into her glass and then poured tea over them. The chick planted its front feet on the table, evidently intrigued.

Hm...

I picked up an ice cube and popped it into the chick’s beak. A delighted purr was the response.

Just as I handed the albatross her glass of tea, a sea-green griffin alighted soundlessly on the beach. No sorcerer could ever achieve such mastery of wind magic. The long-necked creature had golden eyes and a yellow beak, and with its lack of horns, I took it for the chick’s mother. She must have been at least twice as long as a human man was tall, with slender, glistening wings and a beautiful coat of azure and emerald plumage. Her limbs terminated in razor-sharp talons.

The girls had taken notice of our situation, but I motioned them not to intervene. I was going to be fine.

I set the chick on the ground. It ambled unsteadily toward its mother, stopping at her feet. Then, it turned back toward me and shook itself—a gesture of gratitude.

“It isn’t hurt,” I informed the mother griffin. “Please take care not to drop it again.”

The mother gently scooped her chick up with her beak and deposited it on her back, then spread her wings and took flight.

The girls came racing toward me, all shouting over each other. I caught a “Sir, sir!” from Tina, an “Oh, Allen, sir!” from Ellie, and a “Dear brother! Don’t tell me you can tame a fully grown griffin—and a feral one, at that!” from Lynne. The albatross and I exchanged looks, then burst out laughing.

“Allen! Above you!” Caren shouted anxiously.

“Yes, she’s conscientious,” I replied as a rush of wings heralded a number of round objects falling toward us. I caught them with levitation spells.

The girls joined hands, startled by the dozen or so hovering nuts, each roughly the size of an adult cat.

“Wh-What are these?” Tina asked.

Ellie replied, “S-Some kind of giant fruit.”

“I’ve n-never seen a griffin return a favor before,” Lynne added.

These were fruits of the Great Tree—although they actually came from its descendants in the nearby forest. Caren and I had often eaten them as children. The fruits grown in the eastern capital itself, however, were generally beyond our means, being luxury items destined for royalty and other prominent persons.

“Would you put holes in them, Caren?” I requested.

“Sure.” She promptly set about opening the fruit with her dagger.

I took one and held it above a deep glass bowl on the table. The girls watched with interest as I flipped the fruit over. Before the juice inside dripped out, I cast ice and wind spells, fashioning a miniature whirlpool. Three amazed shouts greeted the resulting shower of frozen juice, which piled up in the bowl like snow.

I scooped up a spoonful and offered it to my sister. “Tell us how it tastes, Caren. Say ‘aah.’”

“A-Allen, I...” Despite her initial reluctance, Caren soon gave in and popped the spoon into her mouth.

“How is it?” I asked.

Bashfully, my sister replied, “Cool and a little bit sweet.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” I tossed the fruit into the air, sliced it open with a wind spell, and added its flesh to the bowl. That done, I passed the bowl to Caren and returned my attention to the girls. “Let’s play a game with a few of these. I think you’ll enjoy trying to split them while blindfolded.”

“We’d love to!” Tina cheerfully replied.

“B-But...” Ellie added.

“We’d also like what you just gave Caren, dear brother,” Lynne said, completing their charming request.

My sister ate her frozen fruit juice in silence while I prepared to make a second helping. Then, a thought struck me. “Tina,” I said, “would you care to give it a try?”

“I’d love to! Just leave it to me!” the platinum-haired girl eagerly agreed. Her clenched fists showed her determination.

“Are you certain?” I asked again, just to be mean.

“Humph! I can do it! I’ll show you, sir! You big meanie!”

“All right, then. It’s in your hands.”

“I won’t let you down!”

Ellie and Lynne nervously eyed their enthusiastic classmate.

Now, let's see how she does.

A pleasant lunch ensued. The food we had packed proved delicious, and the fruit juice—reduced to solid blocks of ice—also had its charms.

We spent the afternoon swimming, chasing fish, breaking open fruits of the Great Tree while blindfolded, and generally enjoying ourselves. The girls, worn out from a long day of play, dozed off in the gondola on our return voyage. Caren and the albatross seemed refreshed as well. I was glad that we had made the trip—Dag's incessant teasing notwithstanding.



By the time we arrived home, it was drawing toward evening. Caren made straight for the bath, remarking that she had “worked up a sweat.” Tina, Ellie, and Lynne reported the day's adventures to my mom, who had grown impatient waiting for us but nonetheless listened cheerfully to their accounts. That done, they returned to their room, hopped into bed, and immediately drifted off to dreamland.

“My, it sounds like you had a lovely time,” my mom said, observing the trio. “We should let them sleep until dinner. Allen, Lydia, are you sure you wouldn't like a rest as well?”

“I'm fine,” I replied. “What about you, Lydia?”

“I don't need one either.”

My mom pressed her hands together. “Oh, good. In that case, Lydia dear, would you help me to get dinner ready?”

“Of course, mother.” In a whisper, the albatross added, “That lunch worked like a charm. Thank you so much.”

“I'm glad to hear it,” my mom replied, laughing musically.

“Do you need any errands run, mom?” I asked. “I'd like to step out with Caren.”

My mom's eyes widened, then she beamed. “I was just about to ask you. Wait by the front door.”

“All right. Lydia?”

The albatross simply waved me off, and I nodded my understanding. She really loved my mom.

A short while later, I was tinkering with a spell formula in the entry hall when a voice from behind me called, “Thank you for waiting, Allen.” I looked up to see my adorable little sister.

“Why, Caren, what a surprise,” I said, failing to suppress a smile. “Since when do you wear that out of the house?”

She wore a pale-violet yukata with a chic design of summer flowers, which our mother had stitched for her by hand. I noticed that she also smelled of soap.

“Even I feel like dressing up some days,” she replied diffidently. “How do I look?”

“I knew my sister was the cutest in the whole wide world!”

“A-Allen! Be serious!”

“I mean every word. Now, shall we go?” I held out my left hand, and she took it without protest. Our mandate was to purchase fresh vegetables.

We stepped outside just as the sun was beginning to set. Rounded paper lanterns, a distinctive feature of the city’s beastfolk districts, hung along the streets. “Oh, of course,” I said. “I almost forgot what time of year it is.”

“Yes. If you stay until the week after next, you’ll be here for the Spirit Sending!”

“That’s a tempting prospect. I’d like to stay, if not for my tutoring duties.”

We walked while we spoke and soon turned onto a side street which paralleled a canal. I kept on the side nearer the water. The clip-clop of our footwear filled the air.

“I’m sure the girls will visit their families,” Caren said. “Won’t that give you time to extend your visit?”

“They’re supposed to, but I’ve no idea what their plans are. You can stay on without me, you know.”

“I won’t. I have a duty to keep an eye on you.”

“What an awful way of putting it.”

Caren hugged my left arm and glared reproachfully up at me. “First, you went and became a private tutor without so much as a word to me. The next thing I knew, you were a substitute teacher at the Royal Academy. Then you got involved in setting up a new company for two ducal houses, and you recruited Felicia while you were at it.” She slowly ticked off my crimes on her fingers, illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun. “You took Stella on a date—even if you did have a good reason for it—and took her on as your student. You also stood in as an examiner at the academy the other day. And don’t forget Lydia’s promotion to the princess’s guard. You’ve been *much* too busy!”

“Mm... But they’re all such nice girls,” I said. “All but one, anyway.”

“That’s not the point! You ought to be devoting more time to your sister!” She was hitting her stride.

“I pamper you too, don’t I?” I teased.

“Not enough. Not *nearly* enough.” She turned her face away from me in an adorable display of outrage. Her ears twitched as she demanded, “Did you pick out the clothes Lydia wore on our trip here?”

I hesitated before replying. "I don't always have a say in these things. A point-blank Firebird trumps any argument."

"Liar!"

As our pleasant outing continued, I reflected that I hadn't been able to make this sort of time for Caren in months. I would have to remedy that once we were back in the royal capital and—

My sister stopped in her tracks.

"What's wrong?" I asked, baffled. "Oh! Don't tell me we're lost!"

"We are not. Don't lump me in with Tina," she said. "Allen..."

"Hm?"

Caren stared at me and almost began to speak, but then faltered and fell silent. After several more false starts, she said, "Y-You see—"

"Huh? That you there, Allen?! Hey! Drop by New Town too sometime!" a young fox-clan man called from the skiff he was rowing along the canal. Being a New Town resident, he wore typical clothes rather than a kimono. His boat was laden with fruit of the Great Tree.

"I'll pay you a visit," I promised. "Maybe even tomorrow."

He waved to me and wagged his tail in response.

Once he was out of sight, I turned back to Caren and found her looking dejected. "Sorry. I realize we were in the middle of something," I said, placing a hand on her head. "Why don't you tell me about it? You haven't been quite yourself lately."

She hesitated, taken aback. In the end, however, she said, "It's about my future."

"I thought you planned to attend the university."

"I've been wondering if there's really any point in my going," my sister confessed, sounding indecisive. "I mean, I can learn everything I need from you."

"I appreciate the compliment, although it's a bit embarrassing. Does this mean you'll give up on becoming a court sorceress?"

Caren hurled herself against my chest. Furiously, she muttered, "I don't want any part of an organization that treated you so badly."

So, that's what's been bothering her. I couldn't ask for a more caring sister.

"Personally, I'd still like you to advance to the university and enroll in the professor's department," I said as gently as I could. "Hopefully, you'd show him the error of his ways! But you'll always have my full support no matter what you decide to do."

My sister refused to play along with my jokes. "You kept your sights set on the court sorcerers despite all the prejudice and discrimination you suffered. That was for mom and dad, wasn't it?" She looked up at me with tears in her eyes. "And for me? Because you could earn a lot of money that way. I've been such a burden to—"

"Caren." I tenderly wrapped my arms around her and stroked her

back—just as I used to do when she was upset. “You guessed right.”

“Th-Then—”

I wiped her tears with a finger. “But that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to do whatever I could for mom, dad, and the adorable little girl who used to call me ‘big brother.’ I’ve never once thought of you as a burden.”

Caren buried her face more deeply in my chest. “You don’t play fair, Allen.”

I chuckled theatrically. “For my little sister, I would strike down fate itself!”

“That’s what I mean.” After a silence, she said, “May I ask you a favor?”

“You may,” I answered immediately. Elder brothers are meant to grant their sisters’ whims.

Caren murmured, “I want to go to the university. I’m not sure about becoming a court sorceress yet, though.”

“I thought you would. And don’t worry; I have several years of tuition set aside for you!”

“Allen?!”

“I won’t take no for an answer. I want you to depend on me.”

A long pause ensued. “Fine,” she said at last.

“Good. Now, we have some shopping to do.” I released her and made to resume walking, but she tugged on my shirt. “Caren?”

“Do you mind if I ask you one more thing?”

“Go ahead.”

She bounded ahead of me, clasped her hands behind her back, and looked over her shoulder. The sun had fully set, leaving the streetlamps along the canal to bathe us in their soft light.

“I want to commute to the university from your place!”



I hadn't expected this. "Caren—"

"You already said yes."

I groaned. My lodgings were in the royal capital's working district, hardly a safe home for my adorable little sister.

Caren responded to my worries by sticking out her tongue at me like a mischievous child. "Only joking," she said. "If Stella enrolls too, I'll live with her in the dorms."

"C-Caren!"

"Now do you understand what it feels like to be made fun of? Some soul-searching might be in order for you."

"My soul is always suffering from my sister's harsh demands."

"And my demands will only get harsher. But keep pampering me more than ever—that's the way the world works."

I walked up to her and made a show of hanging my head. "You win. I surrender. Your wish is my command, Madam Vice President."

"That's better. Now, let's go buy those— Who's there?!" Caren moved protectively in front of me. Violet lightning crackled as she began deploying spells.

"W-Wait! I'm n-not gonna try anything!" a wolf-clan boy cried, scrambling out of an alley along the canal. His tone was a mixture of fear and nervous tension.

I glanced at Caren, and she ceased her magical preparations. "Toneri?" I said. "We're in the middle of an errand."

"I don't care what you're doing," he sullenly replied. "I need you to come to the Great Tree. Now."

"The Great Tree? That's awfully sudden."

"Just shut up and follow me!" Toneri snapped. He had always had a short temper, but usually not as short as this.

Caren was still poised for combat.

"We won't get anywhere with Toneri," I called into the gloom, shrugging. "Would you please explain?"

In answer, a young woman in masculine attire emerged from the shadows. Her jet-black hair was tied simply behind her head, her skin was on the dark side, and a plain dagger hung at her hip.

Has her mana changed?

"Aren't you Gil's maid bodyguard?" I asked. "I believe your name is—"

"Konoha," she replied. "I was hesitant to enter the beastfolk district alone as a human, so I requested Mr. Toneri's assistance. Pardon the intrusion, but I must insist that you accompany us."

"May I ask why?"

"Not here, but please consider this a request from Lord Gil."

I expected Gil to come back to the eastern capital, but what could he

want with me?

"I don't believe it!" Caren shouted. "Why would Gil call my brother to the Great Tree and not to the duke's mansion?! And if something's the matter, the summons should have come from Ogi, our clan chieftain! What do you have to say to that, Toneri?!"

"M-My dad wants Allen there too," Toneri replied, his gaze shifting nervously. "H-He says it's urgent."

"What?!" My sister was stunned.

So, our chieftain wants me too. I suppose that settles it.

"Very well. I'll go with you," I told Konoha. "Caren, can you finish the shopping on your own? And tell mom where I've gone."

"If you're going, then so am I!" Caren declared, scattering violet sparks in her anger.

"I beg your pardon," Konoha interjected, "but this is no matter for the general public."

Caren was inarticulate with fury.

"I'll be all right," I assured her, hoping to forestall an eruption.

"I'll just pop over to the Great Tree and then come right back."

Sullenly, Caren said, "I don't believe that for a moment."

"What's this? Don't you trust me?"

"I do. I trust you more than anyone—anyone in the whole world. But still!" She seemed beside herself with worry.

"Thank you." I turned back to the shaken boy and the maid in menswear. "Now, let's be on our way. I need to get this over with soon, or I'll be late for dinner."



"How is Gil?" I asked Konoha as we crossed the Great Bridge.

"Well," she responded brusquely.

The wolf-clan boy made not a peep throughout our journey.

We soon reached the entrance to the Great Tree. The building was the finest in the beastfolk districts, despite having been fashioned from a massive hollow in the living trunk—a feat that only botanical sorcerers could have accomplished. An ornate carriage bearing the Algren crest stood parked beside the door.

A carriage near the Great Tree? Well now.

We greeted the guards, who opened the huge doors once we explained our errand.

The tree's interior housed a vast, circular hall in which numerous beastfolk pored over documents at desks or conversed in small groups. More voices drifted down through an opening in the center of the room's ceiling. Seemingly endless streams of people were ascending and descending the long staircase at the back of the hall. The whole place appeared unchanged since I had visited it with my dad as a

child.

To the beastfolk, this had always been the beating heart of government, administration, business, and religion. All the clans would also take shelter here in times of trouble. The head of the council had his office on the highest floor.

The people we passed looked confused to see Konoha and Toneri, but something seemed to fall into place for them once they spotted me. Several acquaintances waved.

“Come on. Hurry up,” Toneri urged, sounding ill at ease.

“I see your point,” I replied. “Toneri, could you command the vines for us?”

“O-Of course not! Only chieftains and ex-chieftains can use botanical magic!”

“I’ll do it, then.”

“A-Are you nuts?! Didn’t you hear what I just—”

I touched the trunk near the front entrance and cast a botanical spell, creating thick vines that lifted us through the opening in the ceiling. The wolf-clan boy stared around in amazement, while the suit-clad maid gasped.

“Only because we’re inside the Great Tree,” I disclaimed—untruthfully—for Konoha’s benefit.

The vines carried us roughly the height of the royal capital’s cathedral before depositing us in front of the chairman’s office on the highest floor. I could hear muffled voices through its thick door.

Toneri was staring at the floor, his face ashen. “Ogi summoned me,” I reminded him. “Your job isn’t done until you report to him.”

“I... I don’t need you to tell me that!” he snapped, then knocked on the door—courteously, despite his irritation.

“It isn’t locked,” came the quiet reply.

Toneri jerked his chin, motioning for me to enter.

“Pardon me,” I said.

Inside I found four men, three of them human and all staring at me. The humans all had light-blond hair with pale-violet forelocks. One was strongly built and nearing forty. He wore a deep-violet military uniform with an ornate, knightly longsword at his hip. The next was slight and clad in a robe such as priests often wore, with small spectacles perched before his narrow eyes. I took him to be in his late twenties. The last and nearest to me was my university friend Gil Algren, dressed as a sorcerer.

“A-Allen?! What are you doing here?!” Gil cried, leaping from his seat. At almost the same moment, the frowning, black-haired wolf-clan man behind the office desk spoke my name more quietly but with no less confusion. This was my clan chieftain and the representative of the beastfolk as a whole.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Chieftain Ogi,” I said. “And Your Highness, Lord Gil Algren as well. I was informed that you wished to see me and came with all due haste.”

“Me?” Both Gil and Ogi looked bewildered.

“Lord Gil,” the maid interjected, “I have brought the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, as you instructed.”

“Konoha?!” Gil exclaimed. I was unsurprised to learn that the summons had been a fiction.

My gaze met Toneri’s just before Konoha shut the door. There were dark emotions in his eyes, as well as an intense unease.

The man in uniform gave me an all-too-familiar look of contempt, scorn, and loathing, then returned his attention to Ogi. The gold chain around his neck glinted as he pounded his fist on the chieftain’s desk.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Ogi! Hand over control of the militia and agree to a temporary requisition of the Great Tree!”

“I refuse, in accordance with the Old Pledge,” Ogi slowly replied. “Our social standings may differ, but we are the equals of your house. Surrendering the Great Tree, even temporarily, is out of the question. As for placing the militia at your disposal... Perhaps in war. But in this time of peace? I wish to speak with the duke personally.”

The beastfolk militia had seen better days, but it remained a crack fighting force. What could the Algrens want it for?

“That moldy old pact was signed two hundred years ago!” the big man shouted. “I’ll annul it the moment I inherit!”

“Then I suggest you return when that time comes. If you attempt to annul the pact, we are prepared to take our suit directly to His Majesty in the royal capital.”

The man ground his teeth.

“Please tell me what this is about, Lord Grant,” the chieftain continued evenly. “You and your brothers arrived out of the blue and began making demands without so much as a word of explanation. Does the old duke know of this?”

“Leave my father out of it. The matter is urgent! At present, we have only Gregory’s troops and the guards at our command. Unless we act soon...the eastern capital might very well burn!”

These words, coming from His Highness, Lord Grant Algren, were too much for Ogi to ignore. “What?” he said, stunned. “Did I hear you right? You say the city will burn?”

Lord Grant screamed in frustration. “E-Enough! Enough! Enough! Y-You won’t give us soldiers *or* the tree?”

“No, I will not. But I will take the liberty of informing the old duke that—”

Lord Grant cut Ogi’s words short with a snort and a sharp “Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” as he flung open the door. I caught a

momentary glance pass between him and the maid in menswear waiting outside before he slammed the door shut behind him.

I believe I've sensed this mana before—at the Algren mansion in the royal capital.

A deep sigh from my chieftain interrupted my puzzled reflections.

The man in priestly robes stood up and courteously introduced himself. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Brain of the Lady of the Sword. My name is Gregory Algren. I appreciate all you've done for my younger brother...and I apologize for my elder brother's behavior. The military exercises along our eastern border must have set him on edge."

How humble he is for a duke's son.

"Oh, you needn't apologize. I'm Allen, and the pleasure is mine." I then turned to my chieftain. "I don't understand, Ogi. What is this about?"

"I only know what you just heard," Ogi replied. "Lord Gregory, kindly tell us whatever you can. What has made your eldest brother so impatient?"

Lord Gregory hung his head, looking equally as glum as Gil, and then said, "Are you aware that our house was responsible for holding Prince Gerard under guard?"

I nodded and glanced at Ogi, noting that word had evidently reached the chieftain. "Yes. I was present during his offense."

"So I've heard!" the slit-eyed nobleman exclaimed, his head jerking upright. "Another glorious addition to the magnificent exploits of the Lady of the Sword and her Brain!"

"Th-Thank you very much." I stealthily shot Gil a glance that asked: "What's this about?"

My former schoolmate's answering look said, "Keeping up with the latest about you and the boss is his hobby."

My, what an eccentric.

"So, how is Prince Gerard involved?" I asked, hoping to move the conversation forward.

"Grant hoped to keep this private, but I'll be blunt: the prince escaped and is currently in hiding. To make matters worse, we believe him to be plotting some act of widespread destruction in the eastern capital."

"Gregory?!" Gil wailed. "Grant told us that was top secret!"

Lord Gregory shook his head. "It's no use trying to hide it."

"I don't quite follow," Ogi interjected. "I have heard that the prince was a knight of the royal guard, but he's only one man. Shouldn't arresting him be a simple matter?"

His doubt was understandable. Gerard had been a capable fighter—the eighth best in the guard—but he had injured his dominant right

arm in our battle at the Royal Academy. That wound had put an end to his career as a knight, or so I had heard.

Lord Gregory's face fell. "Our house's main force, under my eldest brother's command, is currently occupied with our response to the maneuvers that the Knights of the Holy Spirit are conducting. My next eldest brother is on the outskirts of the royal capital with the Violet Order, one of our Two Wings. I, to my shame, am frail and no warrior, while my younger brother is still a student. We've kept no elite troops in the city—we never dreamed that we would have need of them. And so, we hoped to call on the aid of the beastfolk to see us through this unsought predicament. As for requisitioning the Great Tree... I'm sorry, but I'm as baffled as you are. A last-ditch precaution, perhaps. And"—he hesitated—"our father, Guido Algren, is gravely ill. We recalled Gil to the eastern capital because we fear the worst, and because duty often takes my brothers and I from home. That is why our father cannot be here with us."

A heavy atmosphere pervaded the room. Gil seemed on the verge of tears.

"Rumor has it that the royal guard has taken action," Ogi said softly, probing for more information.

"The guard was...defeated. Lord Richard Leinster, who led the force, is hospitalized in this city."

Lord Gregory had only bad news, it seemed.

"Is the prince alone?" I asked, continuing where Ogi left off.

"No," Lord Gregory replied, shaking his head. "He seems to be amassing a small army, although I can't imagine how he funds it. The situation is so severe that the commander of the royal guard himself is hastening from the royal capital. We've identified the prince's hiding place, and we plan to raid it tonight. I've even committed my own troops to the operation, for what little that's worth. I believe that Grant simply...didn't wish to admit our house's failings."

"I see," I said after a long pause. The situation was more dire than I'd realized.

The beastfolk set great store by their Old Pledges with the Ducal Houses of Algren and Lebufera. In the final battle of the War of the Dark Lord, the two houses had nearly doomed our whole army with their rash advance. The beastfolk battalions had redeemed the failure with their own blood, bringing the battle to an inconclusive end but suffering virtual annihilation in the process. In reparations, each ducal house had made the beastfolk a pledge: the Algrens to recognize the Great Tree as sacred ground and to grant the beastfolk extensive rights to self-governance in the eastern capital; the Lebuferas to grant the beastfolk a single wish using all the power at their disposal.

The pledges were inviolable except in the gravest of national

calamities, and not even Gerard's rebellion would qualify—it was “merely” a major incident. Given the information at our disposal, I doubted that Ogi could issue a decision without consulting the council of chieftains. Nevertheless, Lord Grant's demand for control of the Great Tree worried me—it was the source of the strategic barrier that would shield the city in the event of an emergency. Of course, to my knowledge, only a great spell was capable of leveling an entire city in one blow.

I suppose I'm out of options.

I shrugged. “Ogi, the council will never reach a decision in time. I'll go. The commander of the royal guard is an old acquaintance of mine, so I think I can be of some use.”

“Allen!” the chieftain roared, but a cry from Lord Gregory drowned out his next words.

“How heartening it would be to have you on our side, Mr. Allen! Few sorcerers in the kingdom can equal—much less better—you. In our present plight, you're as good as a host of reinforcements! Besides which...you're free to act on your own initiative. Chieftain Ogi.”

“Yes?” Ogi warily replied.

The nobleman made his narrow eyes still narrower. “On paper, at least, the titles of clan chieftain and council chairman are open to any beastfolk in the register provided to the House of Algren, regardless of ancestry. Do I have that right? And that register contains the name of every beastfolk in the eastern capital, with the exception of criminals.”

“What of it?” the chieftain snapped. “I don't have time for—”

“Mr. Allen's name is missing from the register you provided us. In other words, you consider that this gentleman is not of the beastfolk. You thus have no authority to forbid him from joining our battle.”

The ever-composed Ogi was shaken. “We... We think of Allen as family.”

“But his name isn't in the register.”

Ogi fell silent.

Lord Gregory glanced at me and continued. “And when Mr. Allen was denied a place in the court sorcerers for indefensible reasons, you chose to stand by without a word of protest. You're hardly in a position to restrain him now.”

“Wh-Where did you hear that?! Only the council could know!” The chieftain's large body shook.

The register was one thing, but this was news to me as well. Gil was flabbergasted.

“Your Highness, I think you've said enough,” I interjected, offering Ogi a reprieve.

Lord Gregory bowed deeply. “Pardon my impertinence.”

The calm, gentle elder wolf was grimacing.

“Don’t worry. I understand,” I assured him. “I’m not a child.”

“Allen!” he cried. “W-We can’t send you, of all people, out to fight!”

“I know.”

We *were* family, but not everyone could accept even the possibility that I might become chieftain someday. More than a decade later, the people of New Town still remembered Atra.

“Would you tell me where the prince is hiding and where Richard is hospitalized?” I asked Lord Gregory.

“Just a moment.” The nobleman produced a pen and notebook and began to write. For an instant, I glimpsed a gold chain around his neck.

Does it match his eldest brother’s? Something about this isn’t quite right. And that mana I sensed from Konoha earlier... I pressed a hand to my head. *What am I missing?*

Lord Gregory proffered me a sheet of paper.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “Till later this evening.”

My gaze met Gil’s as I turned toward the door. His eyes betrayed anguish and dismay—the result, I took it, of his conflicting loyalties to his house and to me. I flashed him a wink that meant “Don’t let it bother you.”

“Allen!” Ogi cried sorrowfully. “You’re one of us! One of the beastfolk and the wolf clan!”

I know. That’s why I’m going to defend this city.

I nodded to the maid in menswear waiting outside the room.

“Konoha...take good care of Gil.”

“Certainly.” For the first time that day, I heard genuine emotion in her voice.

Toneri was nowhere to be seen.

✱

The little magical bird I conjured to bear a message to the commander of the royal guard prompted an immediate response: “Grateful. Sorry. Waiting for you.” I could sense his enthusiasm.

The problem was how much to tell the girls, and I was still pondering it when I arrived home. I heard running footsteps, and then Tina and Lynne raced out to greet me in their everyday clothes. They must have picked up on my mana.

“Hurry, sir! This way!” the platinum-haired noblewoman cried.

“Dear brother, we’re grilling in the inner courtyard!” added her red-haired peer.

Ellie and Caren were not far behind them, dressed in a maid uniform and casual wear, respectively.

“I h-helped cook, Allen, sir! We have chilled watermelon!” the

maid announced.

"I can't wait to try some." I nodded slightly to my sister, who had apparently done an excellent job of explaining away my absence. Still, I glimpsed concern and frustration in her eyes.

"Caren, where's Lydia?" I asked.

"She received a summons from the Ducal House of Algren. I'm sure she'll be back soon."

"You don't say." Caren's little white lie ought to reassure the girls. The Lydia I knew would spring into action as soon as she learned that I had been escorted to the Great Tree. She was probably sending out little birds of her own to gather intelligence.

"Now, go back inside," I told the girls, mimicking my usual tone. "I'll join you once I've changed clothes."

The trio cheerfully assented, and I gave another nod to Caren.

Look after the girls for me.

We were in the Duchy of Algren; the daughters of other dukes embroiling themselves in conflict here, without permission or authority, could not fail to cause problems down the road. Above all, my parents' house was near enough to the Great Tree for them to take shelter if it should come to that.

In my room, I changed into my ordinary clothes. As for a staff, I would borrow a spare from the knights of the royal guard.

Footsteps intruded on my preparations.

"Allen..."

It was my mom. She took one look at my outfit and grew teary-eyed.

"Don't worry," I said. "I've just been summoned to join Lydia."

"Liar." Her tone brooked no argument. She drew nearer and looked up at me, her face a mask of worry. "Do you realize how many years I've been your mother? You can't fool me."

"Mom..."

"Yes?"

I hesitated. I had done my best to avoid thinking about this subject. "Am I...human? Or am I beastfolk?"

"Who was it? Who's been saying such awful things to you?"

My eyes widened as my mom hugged me tight. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she declared, "You're Nathan's and my precious, precious little boy! Our one and only son!"

I was too overwhelmed with gratitude to respond at first. "Thank you, mom. Would you save some dinner for me? I'll eat when I get home." This last request recalled my childhood.

"Be careful. Don't get hurt. And... And..."

"I know. I'll be all right. I'm going out now, dad," I added, noticing his anxious face in the doorway. He must have just come

from his workshop, because he still wore his apron.

“Allen...” he said.

I pulled free of mom’s grip and pushed her toward him.

“Allen...” she sobbed. “Nathan!”

“Ellyn, I’m sure he’ll be fine. I believe in you, Allen, but...you must be careful. Is that clear?”

“Yes. I’ll take care.”

My dad drew a small metal plate from his pocket and pressed it into my hands. His grip was painfully tight, although his calloused hands, which I had loved as a child, were trembling. “I made this to guard against spells. It’s still a prototype, but it can avert a fatal wound.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll take good care of it.”

“You needn’t!” In a calmer tone, he added, “Broken trinkets can be fixed.”

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“May I spend tomorrow in your workshop?” I asked, embarrassed by my selfish request. “From morning to night, like when I was little.”

Tears welled up behind his glasses. “Of course. Of course you may.”

I have nothing to worry about. They love me with all their hearts.

“Thank you. And don’t breathe a word of this to the girls—I wouldn’t want to spoil their summer vacation.”



Tina, Ellie, and Lynne were making merry in the inner courtyard.
I ought to put an end to this soon so that—

A long, cloth-wrapped object landed in my hands. “Let’s make this quick,” the albatross said. “Make time for wine afterward.”

“Lydia...”

She stood with her arms crossed beside the front door, dressed in her scarlet knight’s uniform. “I mean our stroll, obviously,” she added brusquely. “We won’t waste any time. Is that a problem?”

“No. Lydia—”

“If you apologize, I’ll incinerate you, then slice up what’s left.”

I grinned in spite of myself. I was no match for her. “I suppose I’ll thank you, then. Thank you.”

“Dummy.” She clung to my left arm and took my hand. My right hand held the long object—a court sorcerer’s staff. Together, we had nothing to fear.

Let’s start with a bedside visit. I’m curious what Richard has to say.

Chapter 4

Lydia and I stood dumbfounded in a private room of the eastern capital's largest hospital. And who could blame us? Ministering the redheaded gallant before us was an elegantly dressed young lady with shoulder-length, pale-scarlet hair. She must have been around Stella and Caren's age, and she took no notice of us as she skewered a small slice of fruit with a fork and offered it to the knight.

"Here you are, Richard, darling. Say 'aah.'"

"Sasha, I can feed myself," he protested.

"You mustn't! You're gravely wounded!" the young lady cried.

"How does this taste?"

"Delicious," Richard replied after accepting the mouthful. "Thank you."

"It's the least I can do for my betrothed," she said bashfully.

"When I heard that you'd been injured, I... I..."

Richard leaned toward her. "I never dreamed that you'd come all this way without a word to your father the earl," he said. "Nor that you'd pry into classified documents. You've been a naughty girl, my darling Lady Sasha Sykes!"

"Does my naughtiness bother you, Richard, darling?"

"Not in the least."

The vice commander of the royal guard and his noble fiancée brought their faces together. They were just about to touch...when the albatross loudly cleared her throat. Richard smirked and raised his left hand in greeting, so I returned the gesture.

The young lady, meanwhile, slowly turned her head. When she caught sight of us, she let out a soundless scream, flushed bright red, and raced out of the sickroom like a shot. She even forgot to say hello to Lydia.

"Hi there, Lydia, Allen," Richard said, grinning. "I was just thinking that it was about time you got here."

"You're a sorry sight," Lydia responded. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"You've got me there," her brother admitted with a laugh.

"Richard," I said, "I hope you'll do something to console that poor girl."

"What do you take me for? Her furious-yet-earnest reproaches are part of her charm."

“You’re such an idiot,” Lydia said, giving Richard a look of heartfelt scorn. She had an inscrutable way of showing her affection, although I had come to know it well. I hoped that Lynne would grow up to be more forthright.

The noblewoman’s scowl suggested that she had sensed my thoughts, so I decided to cut to the chase. “Richard, what happened?” I asked. “Try to be brief.”

“We’ve been pursuing Gerard in secret for more than a month,” the vice commander gloomily replied. “On suspicion of rebellion.”

“You may be a fool, but I know you’re stronger than that numbskull. I refuse to believe he got the better of you,” Lydia interjected. She cared about her brother, even if she had a funny way of showing it.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Richard replied.

“Then why—”

“I take it that the state of your right arm has something to do with it,” I said, interrupting Lydia.

“Would you unbandage it for me?” the vice commander asked, smiling gently. “I have a hard time doing it myself.”

Richard’s bandages incorporated fire-resistant barriers, and as I unwrapped them, the stench of burnt flesh filled the sickroom. Only once his injury was laid bare did I realize just how bizarre it truly was. His right arm was not merely scorched—black flames were still slowly consuming it.

“You see how it is,” he said ruefully. “What kind of Leinster gets himself burned? I’m a disgrace to the family name.”

“An ancient fire spell, heavily encrypted,” I muttered. “Richard, how did—”

“We went head-to-head with Gerard three times,” the vice commander said, ignoring my unfinished question. Lydia crossed her arms and began drumming her fingers. “The first time was in an old house near the Four Heroes Sea. We failed...because of William Marshal.”

“The Black Knight?!” I exclaimed. “But I heard he went missing after the wounds he sustained from that black dragon four years ago.”

“He wasn’t nearly as tough as he used to be back when he won the Royal Tournament.”

“Then, even against the kingdom’s former champion, I don’t see how—”

“He couldn’t measure up to the likes of the Lady of the Sword or our commander,” Richard agreed, interrupting me again. “We actually managed to deal with him. Or we would have, if he’d been alone.”

“Gerard had other soldiers?”

“By the second time we tracked him down, his ranks had swelled

to several dozen men-at-arms, built around a core of expert fighters. They were no retirees and used the spells and swordplay of the Royal Knights.”

“You mean to say that members of the Order of Royal Knights are aiding a rebellion?” I demanded, shocked.

Richard ignored me and continued. “Then came our third encounter. We charged into a ruin on the outskirts of the eastern capital, determined to succeed at last. And it looked like we were going to—until Gerard pulled out an old, tattered piece of paper and cast a spell I’d never seen before. Whatever it was, it’s too dangerous to ignore. This city is probably his first target. And then...the royal capital!”

Upon hearing this, Lydia turned on her heel and left the sickroom. She could be so reticent with her feelings.

I cast a spell on Richard’s right arm.

“Hm? What’d you just do?” he asked. “The pain is fading.”

“That’s an anti-fire spell I’ve been researching privately. It ought to buy you some time.” I retied my older friend’s bandages, then lowered my voice and said, “Three failed raids in a row... Could information be leaking somehow?”

A tinge of distress entered Richard’s expression. “After the first failure, I requested Algren reinforcements more times than I can count. But the old duke must be in a bad way, because I haven’t seen him since I first arrived in the east. Grant, who’s been filling his shoes, fed me excuses about the maneuvers he’s conducting on the border and the Violet Order being away in the royal capital. In the end, he wouldn’t give me one measly soldier. Then, our next raids ran into a slew of traps and mercenaries. I hear Gregory finally got his guards involved now that Gerard is so close to the capital, but I still smell a rat. Watch your back, Allen.”

For a moment, I was too stunned to reply. “Very well,” I said at last.

So, there’s a traitor in the Ducal House of Algren. Could they be behind the summons that brought me to the Great Tree? Do they want to get me involved? Or Lydia, perhaps?

“Lydia must be disgusted by the sorry state I’m in,” the vice commander of the royal guard muttered, dejected. Like his sister, he lost heart for the strangest reasons.

Silently, I mouthed a secret: “Of course not! Don’t worry; Lydia loves you.”



Commander Owain Albright of the royal guard greeted Lydia and me at his encampment on the outskirts of the eastern capital. The

great bear of a man looked small for some reason. He had known Richard since they were children, and I'd heard that the two friends—along with the staff officer-slash-vice commander, who had remained in the royal capital—had shaped the knights of the royal guard into the elite force that they now were.

We were shown into the commander's tent, and as soon as the other knights withdrew, Owain bowed deeply to us. "Sorry," he said. "I hate to make you clean up our mess."

The albatross crossed her arms and cast a glance at him. "What are you knights good for?" she spat. "Don't make my idiot brother do all the work."

"I know you're worried, Lydia, but there's no need to panic," I said. "Richard won't be in danger anytime soon."

"I'm not worried," she snapped, turning her head away.

"Owain, what's the situation?" I asked.

The commander tapped a map with one of his thick fingers. "We're in position to strike at a moment's notice," he said. "The Algrens sent out their guards too, but we can't count on them in a fight."

"And your assessment of the enemy force?"

"Barely fifty at the outside. As for where they get their equipment and funding from..." Owain's gaze hardened. He also suspected the Algrens, which explained Lord Gregory's absence from this meeting.

I, too, found it hard to believe that the Algrens—one of only four ducal houses in the whole kingdom—would allow mere military exercises to keep their best troops from the front lines of a situation this volatile. Still, the eldest brother's panic had seemed genuine. Even if he was secretly in league with Gerard, he probably hadn't planned on this outcome.

"Can't we just burn the house down with them in it?" Lydia asked. "That seems like the quickest solution."

"No," I replied. "We need to identify those black flames that scorched Richard's arm, and that means capturing Prince Gerard. Otherwise, the spell may remain active even after the caster's defeat."

All my time with Lydia since our enrollment in the Royal Academy had given me some insight into her character, and I could tell that she was anxious. I gently took her hand, and she squeezed mine tightly.

Owain loudly and theatrically cleared his throat. "I'd like the two of you to handle Gerard," the renowned commander of the royal guard announced. "I assume you can guess why."

"Those black flames?" I said.

"Right. If... *If* even the lady and you can't stop him, then...I'll cut him down."

I sensed his determination, but I doubted that he would need to act on it. I thought I knew what those black flames were.

The moon and stars shone overhead when we left our meeting with Owain. From there, we swiftly moved to a building near the old mansion where Gerard was supposed to be hiding out. The place was already within the city limits, not far from the beastfolk district of New Town.

Our target was a sprawling complex surrounded by a high, thick stone wall. The building itself was stone as well, with spires that caught the moonlight—an unusual sight in the eastern capital. To my dismay, I saw that it was built like a small fortress; only the front and rear entrances offered avenues of attack, and each room within was apparently large enough to accommodate numerous soldiers. The estate's original owner, Earl Rupert, must have feared a beastfolk assault—he was the nobleman who had fled to the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit after running over a little fox-clan girl with his carriage. I had heard that his mansion lay vacant for want of a buyer, but I hadn't expected to come across it like this.

The Algren troops were so demoralized that they might not even prove an adequate wall against escapees. Lord Gregory's personal force of sorcerers was the sole exception. Both their leader and His Highness's adjutant wore hooded gray robes. They were also the only proficient fighters, if their mana was anything to judge by.

Owain, four royal guard company commanders, Lydia, and I began our final review of the coming operation.

"I'll take the front," the commander of the royal guard said, tapping a plan of the building spread out on a table. "Any objections, my lady?"

"Suit yourself," Lydia replied. "We'll circle around to the back. Allen and I will be all the strike force we need."

"Understood. I'll just assign you a messenger in case you run into serious resistance."

The company commanders nodded their assent in silence. The whole kingdom knew the Lady of the Sword by reputation.

Our concealed foes numbered several dozen anonymous soldiers and a handful of known veterans. In comparison, we had roughly one hundred knights of the royal guard—the pick of four companies—along with their commander and the Lady of the Sword. Our victory was assured, but we would be hard-pressed if Gerard unleashed those dark flames—a spell that resembled Radiant Shield in its uncontrolled state. I would need to plan for the worst if—

A glare from Lydia cut my musings short. "I won't let you risk your life on my watch," she said. I had known her long enough to

realize that she meant it, so I closed my eyes and raised my hands in surrender.

"If your estimates are correct, we'll manage," I said. "I trust you don't object, Owain?"

"You won't hear me complaining! If anyone's going to put his life on the line, it'll be me." The commander chuckled and added, "That's one of the perks of being in charge!"

Owain's declaration prompted an outburst of complaints from his company commanders.

"That's an abuse of authority, sir!"

"Please allow Second Company to—"

"I won't let you hog the glory either, Bertrand! Third Company will avenge the vice commander!"

"Simon, Fourth Company deserves a chance to shine. We've been on standby all the time lately."

In the end, all four volunteered. Their morale couldn't have been higher.

Owain summed up our mission: "We're going to take him here, so give this all you've got! As soon as everybody's in position, we strike."

"Excuse me, sir!" a young knight shouted, running into the room. He was acting as a messenger. "An emissary from the royal capital is here!"

"An emissary?" Owain repeated. "Can't you see we're busy? Tell whoever it is to wait until the operation's over!"

"Oh, well, you see, sir..." The young knight faltered, unsure of his response.

"What?!" the commander roared. "Out with it, Ryan! Who the hell is it?!"

"I see you're as sharp-tongued as ever, Owain," a smirking gentleman remarked as he entered the room. A black cat leapt from his shoulder to mine.

I hope the long journey wasn't too hard on you, Anko.

The knights froze, alarmed by the arrival of one of the kingdom's most accomplished sorcerers.

"Professor," I said.

"Why hello, Allen. I'm glad to see you look well. And you too, Lydia," Our former teacher replied.

"I suppose I don't need to ask what brings you here, given that you've come in sorcerer's robes and carrying your staff."

The professor nodded gravely. "We succeeded—with great difficulty, I may add—in deciphering the final page. As we suspected, it is *her* diary. But"—he scowled and handed me a note—"the page containing the spell formula was erased, apart from one scribbled sentence: 'I'll never let the likes of you have it!' Nevertheless, there

were signs that someone had taken great pains to trace a copy of the effaced formula on the final page. It must have taken them over a century. This is a reproduction of a formula from one of the earlier pages—an ancient fire spell.”

My heart sank. The missing spell formula, the signs of copying on the final page, that “old piece of paper” Richard had mentioned... It was the worst-case scenario.

“Thank you,” I said with a bow to the professor. “Now, would you please explain why you brought the girls along with you?” Three familiar little figures trailed in his wake.

“I dropped by your parents’ house and found them anxious to set off after you,” the professor said, accentuating his reply with his typical clownish gestures. “I consider myself a friend to young ladies.”

Tina and Ellie seized my sleeves, crying, “Sir!” and “A-Allen, sir!” I could see the beginnings of tears in their eyes. Lynne hesitated, while Caren watched me suspiciously; the professor must have let slip about the diary.

I turned to face my students and sister. “Tina, Ellie, Lynne, Caren.”

“No!” Tina exclaimed before I had a chance to say more. “I’m going with you. If your enemy uses fire magic, then you could use my help!”

“A-And mine!” Ellie chimed in. “Please, Allen, sir. Please, *please* let us join you.”

“Dear brother, I have faith in you,” Lynne added, “but that’s all the more reason for me to accompany you!”

Caren’s appeal was silent.

Owain and his company commanders tactfully left the room. Meanwhile, the professor—that scoundrel—acted aloof from my predicament.

“Why are you really here?” I demanded of my former teacher.

“Several days ago, a darkly burning piece of Richard’s flesh arrived in the royal capital,” he said, suddenly grave. “I analyzed it.”

So, word has already spread. That must be what brought Lady Sasha.

The professor pounded the floor with his staff. “Those black flames comprise a crude approximation of Radiant Shield and an unknown fire spell. Given that it had the power to inflict serious burns on Richard...I suspect the great spell Blazing Qilin.”

“Even more reason why you should have kept the girls out of this!” I shouted.

Tina and Ellie stiffened.

“I’ve set Lord Rodde to work, along with every experienced elven or dwarven sorcerer that the royal capital could spare,” the professor continued coolly, ignoring my outburst. “They’re preparing to cast a

strategic barrier spell centered on the Great Tree.”

“What? Then, does that mean you’re here to—”

“Activating the barrier will take time. Wouldn’t you say this calls for a sturdy wall?”

“You mean to say that both of you—or rather, *His Majesty* anticipates the worst?” I asked, stunned.

“Naturally.” The dispassionate analyst nodded. “A ruler must consider sacrificing the few to save the many.”

I did not respond.

“Allen, the innocent people of the eastern capital must be our priority,” he said levelly. “I’ll use any piece at my disposal to ensure their safety. That includes asking these girls to join me in erecting a fire-resistant barrier here. You can argue about Caren, but Tina, Ellie, and Lynne are descendants of dukes or their retainers—they have a duty to risk their lives for the people.”

I gritted my teeth. Logically, I saw his point, but...my heart refused to follow my head. “The four of them are still children,” I argued. “This is our responsibility!”

“Berate me to your heart’s content once this is over,” my former teacher replied, laughing sadly at himself. “Allen, Lydia, from Lord Rodde’s and my perspective, the two of you are children to be protected as well. I hope you’ll forgive us for failing to do so.”

In the face of his heartfelt emotion, I dropped my gaze before he did. “Professor,” I mumbled, “that’s not playing fair.”

“Allen,” Caren interjected, “is what he said about Blazing Qilin true?”

Tina and Ellie squeezed my hands with painful force.

“Yes, although it’s only a possibility,” I replied, nodding.

“Then I’m going with you!” Caren shouted, lunging toward me. “I’ll be more useful at your side than casting barriers here!”

I shook my head. “We don’t know what we’re up against. I might not be able to keep you safe.”

My sister froze, then shook herself.

“Take me, then, dear brother!” the red-haired girl proclaimed, tapping the sheath of her sword with her left hand and clapping her right to her chest. “I’m a Leinster too!”

“Thank you, but I already have Lydia. We must make the best of this situation,” I replied, surveying the four girls. “I’m sorry I kept this from you, but please rest easy—everything will be all right.”

“I can’t accept that,” Tina said, letting go of my hand.

“N-Nor can I,” Ellie added, following suit.

“Sir, I know that we can’t measure up to Lydia,” the platinum-haired girl continued, both hands clenched in a white-knuckled grip on her rod. “But... But still!”

“Tina...” I appreciated her genuine concern.

Ellie let out a little squeal as Anko sprang from my shoulder to hers.

“Look after Anko for me,” I told the maid.

“A-Allen, sir...”

“Please don’t cry. Do you still object too, Lynne, Caren?”

“I’ll abide by your decision, dear brother,” Lynne replied slowly.
“But even so!”

“I won’t get in your way, Allen!” Caren shouted. Her eyes turned deep violet as sparks filled the air. She was dead set on accompanying me—as was the platinum-haired noblewoman, who hadn’t taken her gaze off me for some time.

I’m not fond of this approach. Still, I believe I did the same to Gil on his first day in the department.

I launched four magical orbs.

“Sorry. You all fail,” I informed the stunned girls. They hadn’t even been able to react. “That was my spellcasting speed in combat. I’m certain that you’ll surpass me someday if you apply yourselves, but for the present, you’re under my protection. Please let me keep you safe.”

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne bit their lips.

Caren sighed deeply, stared at me, and said, “I’m going to act like such a spoiled brat once this is over.”

“I don’t mind,” I replied. “Look after the girls for me, Caren.”

“Dear brother and sister, please...” Lynne practically sobbed.
“Please be safe.”

“Thank you. We’ll be fine,” I assured her.

“Yes. The two of us will sort this out,” Lydia added, almost before the words were out of my mouth.

“Tina, Ellie,” I said, addressing my two students who had yet to break their silence.

Tina didn’t respond immediately. And when she finally did, she simply said, “I don’t like this.”

“Will you really be all right?” Ellie asked hesitantly.

“I promise we will be, and I’m a man of my word.”

The maid nodded, hugging Anko. I flashed her a smile and wiped the beginnings of tears from her eyes with my handkerchief.

That only leaves...

“Tina.”

The young noblewoman trembled and lowered her gaze when I called her name. “Must I really stay behind?” she asked quietly. “No matter what?”

“You must.”

“And only Lydia can go with you?”

“That’s right,” I said. “For now.”

“Only for now?”

“Yes.”

Tina looked up with determination in her eyes. “I’ll step aside for her this time, but the next time something happens, I’ll stand beside you too.”

“I look forward to it,” I replied. “Professor, the rest is in your hands.”

“I know,” my former teacher said. “I’ve issued an order for all beastfolk to evacuate to the Great Tree—your parents included. And as for the eldest Algren brother...I’m told he’s left the city.”

So, nothing got past him. It was a most disagreeable trait. Still, the professor was just the person I would want at the girls’ side if Blazing Qilin fully activated. He would sacrifice himself before he would abandon a child.

Lydia exited the room without a word. I hoped that she wouldn’t leave me behind.

“I promise we’ll take care of this and return home before you know it,” I told the girls. “And I’ve never broken a promise.”

Once I was out in the corridor, Lydia began walking in silence, and I fell into step behind her. She seemed furious. Abruptly, she stopped and looked me straight in the eye.

“What... What did you mean, ‘for now’?!” she demanded. “She’ll *never* stand at your side. That spot is mine and mine alone, and it’ll stay that way until the end of time.” She was as haughtily self-assured as she had been when I first met her at the Royal Academy four years earlier.

“You never change,” I said. “You’re as pure and straightforward as ever. I’m proud to have had the opportunity to be your partner.”

“Liar. You’re just saying that.”

“I am not a liar, and I’ve always been truthful with you. You know that better than anyone.”

“That’s not what I mean! You’ll be in for a talking-to when this is over, and don’t you forget it.” Then, Lydia let her head droop and murmured, “I don’t have to hold back this time, do I? True Scarlet is a given, but what about my magic?”

“Against a great spell? The sky’s the limit. Lydia, take my hand.” I offered her my right, and she swiftly took it, establishing a shallow link. Her mana was warm and kind.

“I would never leave you behind and escape!” the albatross snapped. “Not for anything!”

“Lydia,” I replied, “you may be the Lady of the Sword, but you are still a lady. No matter what happens, I *will* protect you.”

“Dummy. You always pick times like this to grandstand.”

Even a shallow link made it impossible for me to hide how sincerely I meant what I said. By the same token, I knew that the teary-eyed young woman in front of me would never change her mind.

“We should get going,” I said. “Owain and his knights are waiting for— L-Lydia?”

Without warning, the albatross shoved me up against the wall and clapped her hands to my chest. “Your predictions have never been wrong,” she said. “They’re going to use a great spell. Which means—”

“No.” I interrupted her emphatically.

“Why not?! A deeper mana link is our surest bet! If our connection is strong enough, not even a great spell could—”

“Lydia.” I hugged the albatross tight. “We mustn’t. Back then, when we fought that black dragon, I only made the link as deep as I did because I had no other choice—your life hung in the balance. But this power should be used sparingly, if at all. Certainly not more than we already do.”

“Are you talking about the risk that you’ll gain more control over my mana? I don’t mind being your sword. That way, I’ll never have to leave your side...”

“I’d rather you be the noblewoman who lectures me with a glass of wine in one hand.”

“You’re unbelievable.” As an afterthought, she added, “If you die, I will too.”

“Wh-What a threat...” I stammered.

Lydia is in earnest—now I truly can’t afford to die. Did she leave the room ahead of me just to drive the point home like this?

“I’ve been saying that for ages, silly...” the albatross murmured.

“That’s my Lady First Place. I’m no match for you.”

“If I need to remind you again, I swear I’ll find a way to cast Blazing Qilin. Consider yourself warned.” With her mood restored, Lydia seized my left arm and started walking.

I had no love for Gerard, but I still sympathized with him when I thought of the tragedy to come. No one and nothing—not even one of the legendary great spells—could stop Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, when she was on the warpath.

“I think you mean, when *we* are on the warpath,” she remarked. “Expect that to be on the test.”

“Yes, yes. As my lady commands.”

Owain was waiting for us at the entrance.

“You two lovebirds done quarreling? Put these on,” he said, tossing a pair of communication orbs mounted as earrings, which we

caught and equipped. “We’ve got the whole place surrounded, and there are no underground passages to speak of. They’re trapped in there.”

“Place any remaining forces under the professor’s command,” I suggested, nodding. “He may be twisted, but you can rely on him in a pinch.”

“You’re right—especially about his personality issues. I’ll put him to work.”

“Feel free to push him within an inch of his life,” Lydia added. “It might teach him a lesson—although I doubt it.”

At that moment, I thought I heard someone wail about how little his students cared for him. He had only himself to blame. Still, the diversion seemed to have benefited the knights of the royal guard, who now appeared less tense.

“Well then, good luck,” Owain said. “‘Course, we’ll need it more than you will.”

“I agree. Allen and I are an unbeatable team, so keep all the luck for yourselves,” Lydia replied, relinquishing all my luck to the knights before I could even try to object.

“I would have appreciated some,” I commented, uncovering my staff to reveal a glistening scarlet ribbon tied to it. “But good luck, Owain.”

“Thanks!”

The commander and I bumped fists as the knights began racing off—our cue to follow suit. Lydia and I darted through the dark streets to an alley with a view of the mansion’s rear entrance.

“Owain, we’re in position and ready to move on your signal,” I reported into my communication orb. Its encryption was impressive—perhaps the handiwork of the sharp-tongued staff officer I’d heard so much about.

“We’re ready too,” came the reply. “Now, let’s start this off with a bang.”

I signaled to the knights and took out my pocket watch.

“It’s been so long since I got to cast Firebird without holding back,” Lydia said in a singsong tone. “I can hardly wait!”

“Please try not to overdo it,” I pleaded.

“I won’t be the one doing the fine-tuning, now will I?”

“Where did I go wrong with raising you, I wonder? I’d like to travel back four years and give my past self a piece of my mind.”

“I doubt it would change anything. Even if we hadn’t met when we did, I still would have found you.”

How can I argue with that?

Then, it was time.

“Lydia, let’s get going,” I said.

“Fine.” She raised her right arm high above her head, and a colossal mass of mana began to coalesce above her, shaping itself into a Firebird that must have been twice its usual size.

“Charge!” Owain roared.

At his signal, Lydia’s arm swept down. The bird of death swooped into the mansion’s rear entrance with a thunderous roar, tearing through the doors as though they were made of paper. I operated on pure instinct as Lydia and I charged into the massive opening.

*

The mansion’s interior was dark—too dark for my liking, so I cast a light spell. The illumination revealed a massive hall and a broad flight of stairs. The vicinity was unnaturally devoid of mana.

“Lydia,” I said.

“It looks like they’ve been expecting us,” she replied. “If you’re going to come out, I suggest you be quick about it.”

“I can’t believe you noticed,” a voice responded, accompanied by the click of a tongue. “I guess they don’t call you the Lady of the Sword for nothing.”

More than ten armed fighters came out of hiding, while others descended the stairs. Their mismatched equipment suggested a mix of disgraced knights and mercenaries. I counted at least thirty—more than we’d anticipated.

A twenty-something man in the vanguard drew his sword. Based on his knightly dress, I took him for one of Gerard’s aristocratic hangers-on. “But you can’t fight this many of us!” he continued. “Surrender now, and we’ll spare your life—although not your vulgar tagalong. He’ll die once we finish teaching him to recognize his natural betters!”

“Oh really...?” was the albatross’s response.

“Lydia,” I cautioned; she would need to restrain herself until the man told us what he knew. I turned to him and, feigning agitation, said, “D-Don’t tell me...you knew we were coming.”

“Naturally!” he crowed. “Many sympathize with our cause! They see the error in these foolish new policies that deny lineage its due! And with Prince Gerard’s might, we have nothing to fear!”

“Is Gerard really that powerful?”

“Yes! Powerful enough to place our whole kingdom—nay, the *entire continent*—under his—”

“You’ve said enough,” a large man interrupted. He was nearing old age and carried a greatsword on his back. Despite the stained, hooded gray cloak he wore, I could see his prosthetic right hand and a terrible scar where his left eye ought to be.

“Fool,” the one-eyed warrior—Sir William Marshal, the Black

Knight—spat, casting a contemptuous glance at the younger man.
“Don’t give away our secrets.”

“What?!” the man spluttered. “D-Do you realize who—”

“I’m in command, and we’re facing the Lady of the Sword and her Brain. I hope you realize that giving aid to the enemy sometimes merits the death penalty.”

“H-How dare you! Do you imagine that a little skill with the blade gives you the right to—”

I extinguished my light. Lydia and I dashed through the ensuing darkness, while the men surrounding us faltered; most of them were just riffraff. One by one, my earth spells turned the ground beneath their feet to mud. It was a childish trick, but effective under these circumstances, as a cry of “M-My leg!” made plain.

“C-Calm down!” someone shouted. “Make a light!”

“I’m trying! I-It won’t work!” came the response as I obstructed the group’s attempts at spellcasting.

An organized force might pose a threat, but individuals were easy pickings. Lydia had taken a sword from a nearby fighter and was striking panicked nobles and mercenaries without making a sound or allowing her victims to utter so much as a scream. Only the Black Knight remained motionless. Lydia’s sword swept toward him...and stopped with a metallic clang. His greatsword had deftly parried her slash.

A knight who can block her strikes without resorting to tricks?!

The pair of them exchanged several more blows in the darkness. I cast Divine Darkness Threads to distract him, but he severed every strand.

He’s good!

I fell back, and light filled the room. Skilled sorcerers in matching livery were resisting my interference. Still, my trick had done its work—fewer than half of our thirty-odd foes remained standing.

“Impossible!” the knight who had given us information exclaimed, the blood draining from his face. “You expect me to believe that you cut down more than ten men in an instant?!”

Lydia tossed away her borrowed sword, which stuck into the floor, and remarked, “What a shoddy piece of work. Do you think they’re strapped for funds?”

“They have supporters and sorcerers, but quality armaments are beyond their means,” I responded, making a show of nodding repeatedly. “That narrows things down considerably. I’ll add your name to my report in recognition of your assistance in resolving this incident.”

“D-Die!” the noble sycophant screamed as he charged toward me, his eyes bloodshot.

We have bigger fish to fry.

“Don’t take your eyes off me! Your arrogance will cost you your —” Before he finished speaking, a Firebird instantly vaporized his sword. A direct hit wouldn’t have left even his bones behind, so he was probably still alive. I kicked the stunned nobleman in the stomach for good measure, and he thudded into the wall as the deadly bird alighted on Lydia’s left arm with evident dissatisfaction. Its flames didn’t so much as singe her.

“Such mastery of supreme magic for one your age!” the one-armed, one-eyed knight exclaimed. “The rumors fail to do you justice!”

“Would you stand aside?” Lydia asked, ignoring his praise. “We have business with your brainless prince.”

“That I cannot do. A knight must be ever loyal to his liege lord! And it would be amusing to test my skill against the renowned Lady of the Sword.” He paused. “I am William Marshal.”

“Oh. Then die.”

Lydia unleashed her Firebird without mercy. But as it bore gleefully down on the Black Knight, he rapidly cast more than ten of the advanced water spell Ocean Orb to intercept, then bellowed with effort as he took the brunt of it on his sword. Even so, he failed to neutralize the supreme spell completely. The ensuing conflagration should have been instantly fatal, but the knight stepped through the inferno, his cloak burning away to reveal black armor studded with fire-resistant orbs.

“Clever. But if he won’t burn, I’ll just slice him up,” the albatross remarked, narrowing her eyes. “Do you mind if I use it now?”

“Be my guest,” I replied.

The Black Knight ignored our conversation and charged at us, bellowing. I fell back to evade his slash, which shattered the floor and filled the air with debris. He was an orthodox vanguard sorcerer as well as a knight!

Reinforcements were arriving from deeper within the mansion, but the albatross didn’t seem to mind. “You look pretty cute when you’re worried,” she said to me, giggling.

“That doesn’t strike me as a compliment,” I replied.

“On the battlefield, idle words invite death!” the Black Knight roared, deploying another advanced water spell—which I dispelled with a wave of my staff. The sorcerers supporting him from behind attempted to eliminate my interference, but to no avail; the encryption formula I’d built into the spell attacked them, sealing their magic as well.

“You won’t be casting any spells while I’m here,” I said. “Lydia!”
“On it!”

Another Firebird materialized, this time with four wings instead of two. The Black Knight was unfazed. The fresh knights and sorcerers arriving to support him were obviously well equipped. And what were they holding? Scrolls?

Once again, the deadly bird took flight, ready to incinerate all in its path.

“Now!” the Black Knight barked. “Raise the barrier!”

A chorus of “Yes, sir!” followed as his men unfurled their scrolls, covering the whole hall in a military fire-resistant barrier—and not one formulated in the kingdom. The substantially weakened Firebird collided with the Black Knight’s greatsword and, after a struggle, disintegrated.

They blocked one of Lydia’s spells?

I quickly scanned our surroundings and noted more active barriers on the floor, walls, and ceiling. So, the whole mansion was a trap, and they’d known whom to expect. That was more information than merely intercepting our communications could have gotten them.

“Allen, this is Owain!” the commander’s voice crackled from the orb in my ear.

“Are traps slowing you down as well?” I asked.

“You too, huh? There’s sealing magic everywhere, not to mention skilled fighters! Damn!” I heard swords clash, spells burst, and the wounded scream. Owain’s force must have been having a tough time of it.

On our end, the Black Knight had already regained his posture and raised his sword to strike again. Numerous knights, sorcerers, and foot soldiers arrayed themselves behind him.

“Allen!” Owain’s transmission resumed. “Gerard is in a hall on the second floor! We’ll be tied up here for a while! Can you get him?”

“Not a problem,” the albatross interjected. “I’ll send Allen on ahead.”

“Lydia?!” I cried.

“Roger that,” Owain replied. “And try not to slice us up along with everything else, will you?”

“I make no promises. If you’re a real man, learn to dodge,” Lydia snapped.

“Harsh. I’ll try to hurry!”

And with that, the communication cut off.

Soldiers formed up around the Black Knight and began deploying spells one after another. They were tightening their net.

“It’s our best option,” the eager noblewoman beside me said, forestalling my objections. “I take it you’re not keen on leaving me behind.”

At times like this, our long acquaintance was both a blessing and a

curse. I sighed deeply. "Sorry. You'll have to catch up."

"Just get going. Oh, and don't kill him—I want to get some slashes in."

"Don't imagine that you can get past us so easily!" the Black Knight cried. "I'll never let you reach His Royal Highness!"

At his shout, the knights and mercenaries surged forward. The scarlet ribbon on my staff fluttered as I swung the weapon, freezing some of our enemies' armaments solid and then shattering them with wind spells. Lydia bombarded the knights with arrows of fire as they tried to plug the hole in their line. She had chosen elementary spells to avoid the barriers' interference, and the resulting barrage caused gouts of flame.

"I'll see you soon, Lydia," I said.

"Quite soon," she replied.

I kicked foot soldiers aside as I raced up the stairs, casting Divine Earth Chains and Divine Darkness Threads to block pursuit. A few blasts of Divine Lightning Shot while I was at it incapacitated the trapped soldiers, thinning their numbers.

Now for an interview with an old enemy.



"Sir Marshal!" my men screamed, alarmed by the young man's adroit escape.

"Stand firm!" I barked, then grunted with exertion as I hefted my greatsword aloft, ensconcing its blade in water magic to stem the fiery onslaught.

That done, I took stock of the situation. Fallen mercenaries littered the stairs, and the young sorcerer had even contrived to delay pursuit using a multitude of elementary spells. His skill far surpassed what rumor made it—so much so that I could not fathom how he had remained hidden in the shadow of the famous Lady of the Sword. Yet all was still accounted for. His Royal Highness would surely—

"Say... You're expecting that oaf of a prince to come out on top, aren't you?" the Lady of the Sword said, her voice dripping with enmity. She sounded like a different woman than she had before the young man departed. The old wounds on my left eye and right arm ached; I hadn't felt such intimidation since I faced that black dragon.

My skin burned as whirling plumes of flame filled the hall. Before my men's morale broke completely, I roared, "Lady of the Sword! Do you wear that steel at your hip for decoration?! Draw your blade!"

"You can't expect me to slice you up while he's watching. He was furious with me the last time," she replied coolly. She was not taunting us—merely stating the facts as she saw them. The lady of fire understood that her dominance was unassailable.

“I’m angry, you know,” she added, smiling as more blazing feathers filled the air. “You hurt my stupid brother, and you insulted Allen.”

Her mana surged forth, and our battle line instinctively retreated before it. The disgraced nobles were on the verge of surrender. Cold sweat rolled down my cheeks.

So, this is the current Lady of the Sword. Could I have withstood her even in my prime?

The young woman extended her right hand into empty air. “Your assessment is far too optimistic,” she said. “How could anyone stand a chance against me and him together? But in situations like this, he can be a little...inconvenient. After all, he’s the kindest person there is.”

No sooner had those last, whispered words left the Lady of the Sword’s mouth than space distorted around her outstretched hand. Flames blazed forth and then died away, consumed in a concentration of mana that seemed too great for human hands to master.

At last, it appeared: an ominous bloodred scabbard—so dark that it was almost black—wrapped in chains that fell away and vanished as she reached for the sword hilt. She drew the weapon in a single movement, raising a fiery gale that elicited cries of shock and pain from my men and mercenaries. My eyes widened even as I raised my greatsword. One by one, the intricate designs on the broad, handsome blade blazed with scarlet light, as though rejoicing at long-awaited freedom.

So this is that famed heirloom of the Ducal House of Leinster...

“The flaming sword, True Scarlet!” I exclaimed.

“You’re well informed,” the lady remarked. “I wonder if you’ll recognize this.”

A Firebird materialized above her, then dove precipitously. Four wings of fire took shape on the lady’s back as she absorbed the spell. Her blade began to shine still brighter, and her flames pierced our barriers, lighting fires in rapid succession.

Such effortless mastery of the secret Scarlet Sword, I marveled, and tightened my grip on my own weapon.

“Now, shall we continue?” the Lady of the Sword said, flashing a devilish smile. “Oh, but I’m on my own now, so I just might strike too hard by accident. If you must blame someone, blame your brainless prince.”

✱

I sprinted through the mansion. My target had no hope of escape—I knew his mana, and I had memorized the building’s floor plan. The prince was at the back of the second floor.

I thrust open the massive doors with both hands to reveal a vast,

empty hall. All the windowpanes were shattered, but there were lights on the walls. In the center of the room stood a young man with his back to me. The dirty gray cloak he wore concealed even his distinctive blond hair.

Gerard Wainwright, former second prince of the kingdom, turned to face me.

"They said you would come, ignorant peasant," he said slowly. "I knew that the likes of William couldn't stop you."

Words failed me when I saw his face. For all his faults, no one would deny that Gerard had been good-looking. Yet the features of the man before me made that fact difficult to recall. His cheeks were sunken, festering red welts covered his face, and even his vaunted hair had lost its luster. Worst of all were his eyes—lightless and dull as a dead man's.

"If not for you... If you had only yielded Lydia to me, I could have thrust my foolish brother aside and inherited our half-witted father's crown!" he ranted, his voice hoarse with hate. "Someday, I would have struck down the foul Dark Lord, reclaimed the Holy Land, and become a king of legend... But now? Now my place in the line of succession is behind not only my sister, born of impure blood, but the Howard and Leinster girls who disgraced me! And to add insult to injury, I was sent to live in a house built by beastfolk! Damn you! Damn you! *Damn youuuu!* It's all your fault! I'll teach you the difference between us as you die in agony, mock beast!"

I'm glad I didn't bring the girls. This calls for a stern refusal.

"I must decline," I replied. "And my answer won't change no matter how many times you ask: I'll never let you have Lydia."

"Then...diiiie!" The prince waved his left hand, instantly casting dozens of a fire spell I'd never seen before.

Are these spells built entirely out of encryption? And they activate so quickly.

"Your tricks won't help you!" Gerard roared as his magic repelled my attempts at interference. I evaded the fiery serpents, but they pursued me tenaciously.

Homing spells!

I deployed Divine Water Walls as I ran. They gained me some distance, but quickly evaporated as the serpents punched through them. The difference in mana was too great.

"Well?! What's wrong?!" Gerard crowed. "Is scurrying around all you can do? Is it?"

His taunts rang in my ears as I dodged the serpents of flame and racked my brain for a plan. If that secretly overprotective noblewoman sensed me panic through our mana link, she would rush straight to my side, slicing and burning through everything in her

way.

I'd rather not bring her face-to-face with this man.

"Don't imagine that spells are my only weapons!" the prince bellowed. He was waiting for me with a single-edged dagger in his left hand just as I evaded one of his serpents. I quickly changed trajectory with the aid of my staff and a wind spell, tumbling to the floor unscathed.

"Come on! You can do better than that! What happened to that magical control you're so proud of?!"

I put my brain to work as I narrowly avoided the ensuing strikes from his spells and dagger—which resembled the blades that the Church of the Holy Spirit used in its rituals. I had seen that encryption formula of Gerard's before entering the mansion; the professor's notes were proving useful far sooner than I'd anticipated. Still, I would need Gerard to cast his spells again to give me an opening. In the meantime, I found myself backed into a corner of the hall. And the prince's cloak still hid his right arm.

"I can't expect better from the likes of you," Gerard gloated, certain of victory as he commanded his dozens of fiery snakes. "Perish in searing agony amid my sublime flames!"

"No thank you. I know some girls who would be quite upset if I died."

In vexation, Gerard launched a swift fire spell from his dagger at the entrance. He had completely cut off my retreat.

"Now you're trapped," he sneered. "And once I'm done with you, it will be that loathsome woman's turn. All those who fail to appreciate my worth deserve death, but she's at least pretty to look at. I'll have my fun with her before—"

"Enough talk. Stop dawdling and fight, you rotten scoundrel."

The prince's face flushed bright red, and the designs on his dagger flashed crimson as he raised the weapon aloft. When he swung it down, more than one hundred blazing serpents surged toward me. Defense using other elements would have little effect, while jumping into the air would only invite pursuit. But I knew the spell formula!

I swiftly deployed an equal number of fiery serpent spells from my staff. Their activation intercepted every incoming shot.

Gerard froze, taken aback. I would have preferred to dismantle his spells before they activated, but these serpents lacked the openings that ought to exist in all magic. My only option, therefore, was to nullify every blow with one of my own—a feat I could never have managed without Lydia's mana.

I closed distance with the prince and swept my staff upward into his left wrist. His dagger sailed skyward and landed with its point lodged in the floor.

“H-How dare you!” he cried.

“I’m not finished yet!”

Gerard screamed in pain as I thrust my lightning-charged staff into the pit of his stomach and slammed him into the wall. The impact knocked a crimson scabbard to the floor, so I took the opportunity to pick it up. No sooner had I retrieved the fallen dagger and resheathed it than the flames blocking the door subsided. I placed a sealing spell on the weapon and slipped it into my breast pocket. That done, I pressed the end of my staff against my old enemy’s throat and bound him with Divine Darkness Threads.

“That’s quite enough,” I informed him. “Surrender. I’m certain that they’ll spare your life.”

The winded prince was watching me with glazed eyes. Then, his howls of twisted derision began to fill the air. “Fool! Fool! *Fooooool!* You’re too soooft!” Sinister, dark-crimson flames burst from his right arm, incinerating the incombustible threads of darkness magic. “Diie!”

I swiftly leapt backward as the dark flames assailed me. Then, a sharp pain shot through my side.



After my dear brother and sister departed, the room fell silent and remained so. Not even Tina bothered me with her usual complaints, and Ellie and Caren were equally speechless. The professor had stepped out, saying that he was going to lay the groundwork for the barrier. We ought to follow suit.

Until mere moments ago, I had been conceited. I knew that I couldn’t hope to hold a candle to my dear brother and sister, but being told that I would only get in their way had hurt far more than I’d imagined.

No, that wasn’t it. I was jealous. Jealous of my dear sister, whom I loved and respected. Jealous of the only one of us whom my dear brother had chosen. I had been pretending not to notice how I felt. Joining Tina and Ellie in making plays for his affection was my limit, I’d told myself. I couldn’t push further.

I’m sorry, dear brother; I’m a bad girl. Dear sister, I... I...

The sound of hands clapping cut my self-reflection short. I stood up straight as Caren did her best to inspire us.

“That’s quite enough moping,” she said. “We’re going to help the professor. My brother might let us get away with doing nothing, but Lydia will never let us hear the end of it.”

Ellie and I nodded to each other. Caren was right—we needed to do the best we could at the present moment. She left the room with Ellie close behind her. I was about to follow suit, but then I paused to

needle the girl who had yet to move a muscle.

“Are you planning to mind the house while we’re gone, Miss First Place?” I asked with deliberate sarcasm.

Tina fixed me with a glare. “I can’t stand it, Lynne. If only I’d worked harder!”

“Are you implying that my dear brother made the wrong decision?!” I demanded, feeling a pang in my chest.

“I said no such thing!” she snapped.

“Then what do you—”

“But still!”

Oh dear; what fools we both are, some coolheaded part of me scoffed. *This silly argument will get us nowhere*. Yet at the same time, my heart told me that I needed to go through this to discover the path I ought to take.

Tina and I continued to butt heads, tears streaming down our faces, until a young maid threw herself between us.

“Y-You mustn’t fight!” Ellie cried. She must have come back for us. I noticed the professor’s familiar—Anko, I believed its name was—riding on her shoulder. “Mr. Allen will worry when he gets back. Oh, I w-wanted to go with him and fight alongside him toooo!” At that point, she began to bawl her eyes out. Tina and I found ourselves grinning awkwardly, bowled over by her whirlwind entrance.

“Wh-What are you laughing at?” she demanded. “I w-want to help Mr. Allen when—”

“Ellie,” I said, and embraced my friend. She was a year older than me, but no one could take her place in my life.

The magnificent familiar looked uncomfortably hot as Miss First Place joined our huddle. “Ellie, Lynne, our battle is just beginning,” she announced with renewed determination. “Let’s fight our hardest.”

“L-Lady Tina... Yes, let’s,” Ellie replied.

“Tina... I agree,” I said, seconding her assent.

All three of us nodded to each other, then separated. My mind had been in a whirl mere moments ago, but it was calm now. I would do what I could, and someday, I would join my dear brother in—

A familiar surge of sinister mana startled me out of my thoughts and sent Ellie and me running to the window, crying my dear brother’s name. We knew instinctively that the ominous power was directed at him. And it was powerful enough to pierce the strategic military barrier that the professor and the knights of the royal guard were erecting nearby!

Suddenly, the world turned white.

What?

I seized Ellie’s hand and hurriedly drew my sword, attempting to counteract the change with fire magic. Although I called Miss First

Place's name, my voice failed to reach her. What was going—

“Lady Lynne!” Ellie cried as she shoved me to the floor. I heard a *meow*, and a dark barrier covered us.

The next instant, something passed above us. With a crash, the wall with the window froze and shattered. A blizzard raged, but in the instant she passed by us, I could see beautiful azure wings of ice on her back.

“Tina... Dear sister... Dear brother...!”

The words came unbidden to my lips and vanished into the furious howl of the snowstorm.



“Sir Marshal! Now!” one of my men cried.

There were little more than ten of us left holding the line in the flame-wreathed entrance hall. The others were pushing past their limits and focusing their spells on the Lady of the Sword—all in an effort to afford me the briefest of openings.

All of the mercenaries and His Royal Highness's feeble entourage had already fallen—vanquished in but a single strike. We had received advance warning and readied more fire-resistant barriers than I had ever before employed, even in my days as a knight of the Order. I was confident that I had chosen the best possible equipment and approach. Nonetheless, we found ourselves at an overwhelming disadvantage.

My men were all fearless warriors, veterans of the main force of the Order of Royal Knights. Yet the scarlet lady deflected their most powerful spells using only her wings of flame. Her magical sword hung motionless as she calmly stepped toward us, for all the world as though nothing stood in her way.

“You are to be feared,” I murmured, an expression of pure admiration.

My life as a knight had come to an end four years ago, when I had lost my left eye and right arm to the black dragon that the Hero had been pursuing. I could only thank the Holy Spirit for granting me another chance to trade blows with an opponent of this caliber!

I raised my trusty greatsword above my head, poised to strike, and began my final charge. I roared with exertion as I cast advanced water spells with all my might, concentrating more than twenty blasts into the downward sweep of my blade. Countless foes had fallen before this deadly strike—not even the current Lady of the Sword could hope to weather it unscathed!

Then came a flicker of scarlet light, with a blast of scorching air following close on its heels. The tip of my trusty sword, which had survived even the dragon's wrath, sailed through the air, severed cleanly through the blade. The armor I had commissioned from the

republic cracked, and I dropped to the ground, bellowing in agony.

“Not bad for one of that royal oaf’s underlings. On the lower end of middling, I’d say,” the scarlet devil remarked coldly. Her forehead was cut and her left eye red.

My men lay motionless, their massive shields and armor shattered, to say nothing of their swords and spears. The barriers that we had laid with such care were in tatters. I gritted my teeth even as the taste of blood filled my mouth. She had bested all of us in a single blow. Never—not in my wildest dreams—had I imagined that the Lady of the Sword could possess such might.

Allowing the young sorcerer to pass us had been part of the plan. The martial prowess that this young woman had displayed after his departure, however, left all our predictions in the dust. Rumors that she had even dueled with the Hero now seemed plausible. She was without a doubt the very pinnacle of swordplay!

And for that reason, I forced my broken body to rise, using my equally broken sword as a prop. Blood gushed from every inch of my body despite the perpetual healing spells applied to it. Even so, I raised what remained of my greatsword once more.

“You don’t *look* like a fool, but it appears you don’t know when you’re beaten.” The lady of fire frowned, perplexed. “You don’t stand a chance against me.”

“As you say!” I replied. “Yet I am a knight! I must repel all who would harm my liege lord!”

“I don’t have time for this.”

Without warning, a four-winged Firebird materialized and launched itself toward me. Not even my ashes would remain if I allowed myself to take the full brunt of it. Thus, I summoned up the last of my mana and thrust my prosthetic right arm forward. The words of the archbishop of the Church of the Holy Spirit who had given me the artificial limb flashed through my mind: “Ancient magic animates this arm. You must never invoke its power.”

Forgive me, but I cannot heed your warning!

The clash between the Firebird and my prosthetic brought with it searing pain and the reek of burning flesh. I roared and channeled all the mana that I could muster into the disintegrating limb. Baleful ashen flames burst from my arm, consuming the avian messenger of death.

Wh-What the devil?! No—thinking can wait!

Beyond the vanquished Firebird, the lady stood stock-still, a look of disquiet on her upturned face.

“On the battlefield, distraction invites death!” I cried, rallying my strength to plunge the sword in my left hand into—

I saw the flower-filled gardens of the royal palace—a fond

memory of my glory days.

"I'll be the greatest king there's ever been, William!" the young Prince Gerard shouted, his cheeks flushed. "I know I will! Follow me!"

They say that one's life flashes before one's eyes in the moment before death. In which case... Oh, my prince...

An instant later, pain beyond pain shot through me as I felt every muscle and sinew in my body being sliced and incinerated. I collapsed on the spot, unable even to scream.

"What you have is narcissism, not chivalry," came a cold pronouncement. "Your duty was to stop your idiot prince before he made a fool of himself, much less invoked magic like this!"

I sensed the Lady of the Sword vanish, followed by a crash as fragments of ceiling fell around me. She was apparently in a great hurry. Still, I chuckled to myself, she had remained merciless to the end.

My vision was growing dark. I could no longer move so much as a finger, but I could feel His Royal Highness's mana. The great spell Radiant Shield, famed heirloom of the royal family, resembled the mana from my prosthetic arm.

I know that this is wrong. But please, Holy Spirit... Let my prince be...

My consciousness was dimming and my whole body sinking into darkness.

"I suppose this is the best we can hope for from a washed-up knight," a disdainful voice said. "Now, will the mock beast meet my master's expectations?"

This sounds like the Algrens'...



"Come on! Where did all your confidence go?!" Gerard shouted. Ominous black flames spewed from his right arm as he chased me along the corridor.

A direct hit from his mana would kill me. That first strike would likely have been fatal if my dad's protective talisman hadn't suffered it in my place. The construction and encryption of the prince's spells had changed completely and varied with every cast, making even canceling them out impossible.

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry up and diiii!"

Having run out of corridor, I quickly stopped and leapt onto a flight of stairs leading upward. My side ached where Gerard had grazed me, but I ignored the wound and cast Divine Earth Mire under his feet. His face I pelted with a barrage of Divine Light Shots.

"No more triiicks!" he screamed as black flames intercepted all my attacks.

So, he has automated defenses.

I sprinted up to the top floor and then ducked outside through a nearby window. A combination of fire and flares provided sufficient visibility. With the aid of levitation and wind spells, I leapt up to the roof and began running along its almost flat surface. Gouts of black flame from the lower floors punched through the ceiling close behind me.

“Owain!” I called the commander via my communication orb.

“Is this Gerard’s mana?!” came his sharp response.

“He’s chasing me as we speak. Tell your knights to fall back.”

I blasted myself with a wind spell, quickly flinging myself clear as a section of roof collapsed in a mass of black fire. The prince floated up out of the resulting hole. His cloak and most of his shirt were burning away to reveal a bandage-wrapped right arm that had become more animal than human. A writhing spell formula covered the right side of his body and was growing denser while I watched. The left side of his torso likewise bore an insignia that had not been there during our fight at the Royal Academy. On closer inspection, the wriggling black light emanating from his right side seemed to be suppressing bright scarlet flames in his right arm. I recognized the darkly gleaming spell formula as Radiant Shield—he had sloppily inscribed it onto his own body.

This looks like a serious problem.

“Hey, Allen! What’s going on?!” Owain shouted.

“I’m on the roof near the tallest spire!” I replied. “I hope that answers your question. Goodbye.”

“Hey! Al—”

I switched off my communication orb and faced Gerard. There was intense hatred in his eyes.

I ought to make certain he’s unconscious when I capture him, I decided as I readied my staff. The scarlet ribbon gleamed encouragingly.

Gerard let out a peal of derisive laughter. “Do you think you stand a chance?” he said. “This is where you diiie!”

“You might think you have me—”

I stopped in mid-sentence and looked up, stunned by a surge of familiar-but-unexpected mana. An azure-winged girl in white alighted on the roof, which began to whiten around her.

“Tina?!” I cried.

“You must not allow such imitations to vanquish you, my sister. Victory shall be ours,” she said calmly. This was the same voice that I’d heard in the Howard mansion, at the Royal Academy, and at the Algren villa. Did that mean that I was looking at Frigid Crane?

“My sister, Blazing Qilin, ruler of fire,” the girl in white said again. “I beg you—triumph.” She was calling to Gerard—or rather, to

whatever Gerard was keeping imprisoned. Her pale domain was spreading, clashing with the black flames wherever they touched.

“Stop! A lowly animal can’t do this to meee!” the prince wailed, falling to his knees and writhing in pain.

The girl’s eyes widened. “There are two imitations here—the Knight’s and the Saint’s,” she said sadly.

The spell formula on Gerard’s left side flickered, and his flames blazed with renewed intensity, pushing back against the icy world. The prince smirked and then lunged toward the girl.

“Tina!” I cried, channeling all my mana into my legs and rushing to intercept.

Gerard’s right arm struck my staff—a blow so heavy that I strained under the impact. The black fire, meanwhile, extended from the prince’s body, ignoring me to strike at the girl. I forced myself to move, twisting to—

“Foooooool!” Gerard crowed, laughing maniacally. This time, his flames really had pierced my side. Pain shot through me as fresh blood sprayed from the wound.

“Die! Die! Die! Die! Just die alreadyyy!” he shrieked, preparing to capitalize on his opportunity.

I managed to roll out of the way of his second blow and then regain my footing. With a volley of magical arrows, I covered my dash along the roof to put distance between Gerard and me.

I deliberately ignored my pain. I had guarded myself with fire-resistant barriers, but they had done me little good. Healing magic proved equally ineffective. A drawn-out battle would be difficult—impossible if I also needed to protect Tina. Lydia was...on her way. Thus, my best option was to buy time until she arrived.

“Just give uuup!” the prince screeched.

I threaded my way through his flames and lashed out with a spearhead of ice, which I’d formed on the end of my staff...but it was no use. He had seen my blow coming and blocked it with chains of black fire. The increase in his physical ability was staggering.

“Tina! Get away from here!” I shouted.

She was still standing motionless, but her eyes refocused and her wings began to fade. “Huh? Wh-What am I doing h-here?” she stammered. “S-Sir?!”

“Foooooool!” Gerard bellowed. “You’re going to die, and so is the Etherheart girl!”

I grunted as his chains multiplied and the pressure they exerted increased with them.

“Hurry, Tina! Run!” I shouted again.

“Worry about yourself!” Gerard knocked my staff aside. I leapt backward, but his chains still struck me in several places. Tina

screamed while I struggled to evade his follow-up attacks.

“Shut up and watch, cursed child!” the prince snapped. “Watch me tear this lowborn wretch apart!”

“Don’t listen to him, Tina! Just get out of here!” I shouted.

“Sir!” Tina cried. “I... I... What? Wh-What’s going on?”

Flowers of ice began to fill the air and spread out to cover the whole roof. Gerard’s attacks stopped as he fell to his hands and knees, groaning in pain.

“Wh-What?” he stammered. “St-Stop it. Stop! Stop! *Stop!*” Black fire billowed out of his body and joined with the ashen flames from his left side, forming a whirling inferno that hid him from view.

An even mightier torrent of mana burst forth from behind me. I turned to see Tina shrouded in an ice storm and covering her face with her hands.

“Tina!” I cried.

“Sir, I... I can’t stop it,” she responded. “Sir, th-this is—”

The blizzard knocked me off my feet, and my body screamed in protest as I hit the roof. When I regained my footing, breathing heavily, I found a black inferno that seemed almost alive eating away at the ice storm around Tina.

I couldn’t have imagined a worse turn of events. Two great spells—the Knight’s Radiant Shield and the Saint’s Resurrection—were rampaging out of control and attempting to consume both Blazing Qilin and Frigid Crane. The combined power of four great spells was a threat to more than just the eastern capital; the whole region—perhaps even the whole kingdom—was in danger.

The whirl of black-and-ashen flame and the swirling blizzard were slowly rising high into the sky.

I must save Tina.

I tried to step forward, but my legs were unsteady. Just when I was about to fall, someone held me fast. A circular wall of fire took shape around us.

“You big, stupid idiot,” Lydia said, choking back tears. “Who gave you permission to get yourself all bloody? Do you *want* me to slice you up?”

“I’d prefer to avoid any more cuts,” I replied. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m staining your clothes.”

“If you really mean that, I’m going to be furious.”

She cast a staggering number of healing spells on me, then scowled when she saw the wound in my side and applied a further fire-resistant barrier.

“Thank you,” I said as the pain receded. “Lydia, I have a favor to ask.”

“If you ask me to leave you and run, the answer is no. You have a

plan, don't you? I'll see it through to the end." After a pause, she added, "It's too late for you to leave me on my own!"

I'm no match for this willful noblewoman.

"H-Hey!" the albatross protested as I tousled her hair.

"We're up against the great spells Radiant Shield and Resurrection, with Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin into the bargain," I said. "Lydia, I'd like you—"

"To keep Blazing Qilin pinned down, I assume."

"It hasn't fully materialized. I'll see to Tina; with these wounds, I can't keep up with you at your best."

"I have my doubts about how you plan to save her. I hope you know that infidelity is a guaranteed death sentence," the albatross grumbled, pouting. I couldn't keep secrets from her while we were linked, especially at such close quarters. "Oh, all right. But I'm not happy about it. Don't expect me to let you off easy once this is over!"

Lydia dispelled her wall of flames with a quick flash of True Scarlet, revealing the thing that had once been Gerard. It had transformed into a four-legged beast of black-and-ashen flame with features of numerous creatures, including a face like a lion and batlike wings. This was the great spell Blazing Qilin, and even in this doubtless incomplete form, it possessed tremendous mana.

Tina remained within the blizzard that had engulfed her.

"Make do with this," the albatross said, passing me a Firebird. "And come back soon." Her face was so close to mine that I could feel her breath. Fear of losing me filled her eyes.

"Stop him for just a little while," I said. "Feel free to use whatever it takes to pull that off."

"Unbelievable. That was your cue to keep silent and— You're so clueless."

I planted a kiss on Lydia's forehead. Our link deepened, and our mana efficiency increased.

The uncanny flames that formed Blazing Qilin ceased their wavering. It was preparing to attack.

True Scarlet glowed brighter, and four wings of pale fire sprouted from Lydia's back. I found myself thinking—not for the first time—that no one could match her beauty.

"I'll finish this by the time you get back," she said.

"I'm glad to hear it!" I replied.

We launched the Firebird and both started running. Blazing Qilin remained motionless. Was it in pain?

I dove through the black-and-ashen flames and into the jaws of the ferocious blizzard, but Lydia's Firebird pierced through one wall of ice after another. Then, I could see Tina—curled up and sobbing!

With my last flicker of flame, I crashed through the final ice wall.

And then I reached...a world of white.

Tina was right in front of me, but even my most desperate shouts failed to reach her in the soundless domain. And all the while that I was struggling to make contact, my limbs were turning pale with frost. I knelt down and seized the girl's shoulder with my right hand, shaking her as I called her name...but she only shook her head in rejection.

Oh, honestly!

I conjured a tiny pale flame from my staff and let it fall at my feet. The uncanny whiteness...lessened.

"Tina!"

At my third cry, she gave a start and then slowly raised her head to look at me. Her eyes were red with weeping, and the large tears that fell from them froze before they struck the ground.

"S-Sir, I'm s-so sorry," she said tremulously. "Y-You got hurt because of—"

I threw my arms around her. "Tina, everyone makes mistakes—even Lydia and me. Don't torment yourself over just one. Besides, this isn't your fault. You know that, don't you?"

The pressure of the chilling whiteness was mounting, while beyond its limits, dark flames writhed. I was running out of time.

I suppose I can't afford any more indecision.

"Tina, do you understand the being within you?" I asked.

"N-No!" she replied, her eyes now dry. "She just casts spells on her own!"

"Then let me apologize in advance. I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

I pressed my lips to Tina's, deeply linking our mana. Tremendous magical force and turbulent emotion flooded through me. I didn't know how I managed to keep the surge from reaching Lydia, but I did.

"S-Sir!" Tina exclaimed, wide-eyed. She must have been able to hear the girl in white sobbing as well. Frigid Crane was wailing on and on, like a child in extreme distress.

I nodded and took Tina's hand. "Let's help her—together," I said.

"L-Let's!"

"I'll keep your mana under control. Just concentrate on calling out to Frigid Crane."

"A-All right!"

Carefully, gradually, I set about taming the raging torrent of mana. Meanwhile, Tina dedicated herself to praying.

"Please, notice Mr. Allen and me."

The mana began to concentrate. It was working! The furious blizzard was subsiding, giving way to utter tranquility. Soon, we would be able to—

A girl's pale hand touched my side, and to my astonishment, my pain vanished in an azure flash. "Thank you for saving me, Allen," her voice echoed in my mind. "My—our—key."

Then, the world of white crumbled away. The dark flames dispersed as well, affording me a greater field of view.

The first sight that met my eyes was Lydia, mercilessly slicing off one of Blazing Qilin's wings.

Goodness. That's quite a feat against a great spell—or even an imperfect manifestation of one.

"Are you done?!" Lydia shouted without turning around, True Scarlet slung over her shoulder. "Tiny! You're not hurt, are you?!"

"N-No!" Tina responded.

"Good. In that case—" Lydia clucked in irritation as she fell back to my position, fending off a barrage of dark, fiery chains all the while.

Blazing Qilin let out a roar that shook debris from the battered roof and sent it flying in our direction. I cast a defensive spell—or I was about to when the missiles burned up and froze solid.

"What are your impressions?" I asked the albatross.

"I can cut its main body, more or less, but I'll probably set it off by accident if I slice away without a plan," she replied, pointing her fiery sword at the beast of black-and-ashen flame.

The creature's flesh bubbled and burst in clouds of steam, always seeming just on the point of settling into its proper shape. It shook as though in pain, and a bright-scarlet glow occasionally peeked through the baleful fire. Gerard was using his crude Radiant Shield and Resurrection to bind the great spell to his will.

"Did Blazing Qilin strike you as evil?" I asked, turning back to Lydia.

"That fire gives me the creeps, but nothing else," she replied. "I'm guessing that the thing underneath is just suffering."

"S-Sir! L-Lydia!" Tina interjected, determination in her eyes. "Let me help too!"

The albatross moved ahead of us without saying a word. I planted my staff in the roof and offered my right hand to the platinum-haired girl.

"Our target is those dark flames and nothing else," I said.

"Y-Yes, sir!"

My fingers closed around my student's tiny hand. I was just regretting her lack of a weapon when a pool of darkness formed at our feet. A cry of surprise escaped the young noblewoman as her jeweled rod rose into view.

"Thank you very much, Anko!" I called. "Please deliver this to the professor."

I withdrew Gerard's dagger from my coat and deposited it in the shadow, which received it with a meow of assent.

That done, I returned my attention to my student. "Tina, take your rod!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" She seized her favored weapon, and I placed my left hand over hers. Together, we endeavored to channel Frigid Crane's might.

I beseech you, heed this girl's prayers!

Blazing Qilin steadied itself, and Lydia raised True Scarlet.

If only we had a little more—

"The wait is over!" Owain's voice roared from my communication orb. "Brace for impact!"

Numerous military tactical binding spells burst from the mansion's grounds, aimed squarely at Blazing Qilin. The beast roared in agony as chains of light restrained its black-and-ashen flames. The knights couldn't have timed their intervention better, although the clangor of swords and thudding of blows suggested that they were hard-pressed.

"Sorry, but don't count on more backup anytime soon," Owain said. "Make this count!"

Tina and I nodded to each other, clutching her rod as we formulated our spell. And then the girl in white added her hand to ours.

A tiny, snow-white bird of ice took shape before us—the first derivative of Frigid Crane that human wills had conjured in centuries.

"It's beautiful..." Tina murmured, entranced.

Now we're ready to finish this!

Lydia drew her usual sword with her left hand and shifted her stance, holding two blades at the ready. Meanwhile, Blazing Qilin had burned through its restraints and resumed its advance at last, unmistakably more powerful than before.

"Tina! Now!" I shouted.

"Right!" she responded as we raised the rod high and unleashed the bird of ice.

Time itself seemed to freeze as the little bird soared across the burning roof, turning all to snowy whiteness in its wake. Blazing Qilin—or rather, Gerard—must have sensed its peril, because it conjured its most massive sphere of dark flame yet. But even that fireball froze and shattered before the bird as it closed in on the beast's main body.

Gerard's warped face surfaced on part of Blazing Qilin's body, contorting with obsession as he howled, "Alleen!"

Reinvigorated, the black-and-ashen flames put up a fierce resistance. I struggled to control the bird of ice, but I was determined to put an end to this fight, and I was reassured to sense that Tina felt the same.

Lydia smoothly raised both of her swords straight upward. A colossal pale Firebird began to materialize above her head, its six wings proof that she was holding absolutely nothing back. The sight provoked another shriek from Gerard.

“Lydia Leinsteer!”

“I thought I told you to show me more respect!” she snapped, then swung her swords down. Her Firebird dove straight into the great spell, encountering resistance as a portion of the baleful flames moved to intercept it but diverting opposition away from our bird of ice.

“You can do this!” Tina screamed. Despite all the mana she was pouring into our spell, my head didn’t ache in the least.

Then, at last, we broke through!

“Impossiblille...” Gerard wailed as the bird struck him head-on, freezing his massive body. The whole roof became a snowfield and the spire behind the prince a towering icicle.

I couldn’t suppress a sigh of relief, and I was about to smile at Lydia and Tina when a childish voice in my head interrupted. “Not yet, my Allen,” it said.

Gerard fell to the roof with a clatter, his human form restored. I could see no sign of flames around him either. And yet...

“He never learns,” Lydia said, clicking her tongue in vexation.

Tina, meanwhile, pointed ahead of us and cried, “S-Sir! Look at that!”

The black-and-ashen fire had left Gerard and was assuming the shape of a winged quadruped—or rather, three of them! The word *imitation* flashed through my mind as I observed the things. They were grotesquely vile, barely recognizable as animals, and all three were bound with chains of dark flame.

Muffled peals of laughter recalled my attention to Gerard. The prince still lay sprawled on the roof. His face looked like an old man’s, while his right arm was...gone?

“Die! Die, every last one of you!” he shrieked, flinging his hatred at us. “I want everything to burn! Let that woman and the kingdom be ashes if they won’t be mine!”

“Don’t tell me you sacrificed part of your life force to feed it mana!” I cried.

Can his obsession with Lydia and the crown really run so deep?

I closed my eyes. It was time for me to make a choice.

“Lydia,” I called, “your sword.”

“Here.” She casually passed me her trusty blade.

I took it in my left hand and invoked my best approximation of the Scarlet Sword. Then, pulling Lydia’s staff from the roof with my right, I said, “Lydia, Tina, I’d appreciate your assistance.”

The ladies of fire and ice looked startled but were soon beaming.

Countless plumes of flame and flowers of ice danced through the air.

Tina undid the ribbon in her hair and was about to tie it to her rod when her gaze fell on my staff. She darted over to me, tied her ribbon to it just above Lydia's scarlet one, and declared, "That's better!"

"Tiny..."

"We have equal opportunity and a level playing field, although...I may be winning," Tina crowed, gently brushing her fingers against her lips as she goaded Lydia.

The unbeatable Lady of the Sword trembled like a leaf while her fiery plumes raged around her. "All right," she said at last. "I'll teach you where you stand, so make way for your better."

"If you're my better, then I'll overthrow you!" Tina raised her rod high, and azure wings unfurled behind her.

Lydia gripped her flaming sword in both hands and sank into a forward-leaning stance with the blade pointed behind her. She had six wings on her back.

Then, a snowy gust heralded the coming of Tina's largest Blizzard Wolf yet. It immediately began its charge, and Lydia and I followed close at its heels. The left- and rightmost imitations moved to intercept the freezing beast, and their clash sent up showers of ice and dark fire.

Lydia shot ahead of me, cloaked in her wings of pale flame, and swept her blade horizontally with superhuman speed. "Now!" she shouted to me as a scarlet flash cleanly sliced only the black-and-ashen flames from the two creatures.

I slipped past the two imitations, holding my whirling staff out ahead of me. Icy plumes erupted from its tip, forming an Azure Shield.

"Hey!" Lydia gasped, matched by a stunned "That's my sister's spell!" from Tina.

The final imitation gathered its baleful flames and unleashed them on me in a concentrated blast.

How uninspired. I've seen that move before!

Hundreds of icy feathers fluttered, ricocheting wildly as I pulled them together. Then, I stopped spinning my staff and hurled it with all my might. The freezing plumes formed a keen point, transforming the staff into an Azure Spear. The weapon pierced the imitation's right foreleg and bloomed into a mighty tree of ice, pinning the thing in place.

"Not again!" Gerard wailed in his death agony. "Why is it always, always, always youuu?!"

"I suggest you make your exit," I replied, teleporting between the prince and the imitation. "I've had more than enough of you for my liking!"

A swing of my Scarlet Sword completely severed the chains of

black-and-ashen flame. I struck again and again, scattering a flurry of fiery plumes that sliced into the three imitations from all directions and sent Gerard into unconsciousness.

“Sir, that was amazing!” Tina exclaimed, her eyes wide.

“Hm... Not bad,” Lydia added.

I appreciated their praise, but the feat would have been impossible without their mana.

I teleported again, appearing in front of Tina, and Lydia fell back to join us. All three imitations crumpled to the ground with a loud crash. Yet just when I thought that it was all over, bright-scarlet fires sprang from the things’ bodies. All three of us looked on in shock as the flames united in midair and began shaping themselves into a winged quadruped. The very air was shaking.

“S-S-Sir!” Tina cried, clinging to me.

I took a moment to assess the situation before saying, “It seems we have a problem.”

The exhausted girl in white murmured, “Turn the key. Lock her in the box.”

What could that mean? Presumably it was Blazing Qilin that she wished me to confine...but in whom? Housing a great spell within one’s body required an extraordinary supply of mana, if Tina’s situation was anything to judge by. In which case...

Oh!

Lydia looked at me. Then, she took a step toward me, making no effort to hide the delight in her eyes. I retreated a pace. Again she advanced, and again I backed away.

“Wait!” I pleaded. “W-We can’t do this! You know it’ll turn into a major issue!”

“But not as major as losing the eastern capital,” she countered.

“Sir! Lydia!” Tina cried urgently.

A shock wave tore through the vicinity as Blazing Qilin’s flames settled into their proper shape. I hastily raised several hundred wind barriers in its path, allowing us to weather the onslaught. Even so, I found it hard to believe that the great spell was capable of so much without even using its fire.

Lydia seized my left hand and pulled me into her powerful embrace.

Sh-She has a grip like a vise!

“Come on,” she said. “The man is supposed to take the lead at times like this.”

“That’s really not the iss—”

Her passionate kiss cut my protestations short.

We joined together with fierce intensity, and then...we parted. Lydia brought her dainty fingers to her lips before sticking out her

tongue and making a bewitching show of licking them.

Tina was at a loss for words, although her mouth flapped silently. She was blushing bright red—and so was I, without a doubt. Meanwhile, the willful noblewoman was in the best mood I had ever seen her in as she unfurled eight mighty wings from her back.



“Have you no delicacy?” I weakly protested.

“It’s your fault for dithering,” she replied. “Didn’t you like it?”

“Is that any way to ask— Lydia.”

“I’ll be fine. I have you with me.”

I squeezed the albatross’s hand, and we leveled True Scarlet at Blazing Qilin. The great spell roared, but it was only confused. A single, swift sword stroke dispelled the resulting shock wave.

Tina let out a baffled “Huh?”

“Let’s go,” I said to Lydia.

“Let’s.”

And with that, I opened the “box.”

The whole building creaked as gusts of bright-scarlet flame swept over it and then began gathering into Lydia. Then, through the splitting pain in my head, I saw them—two women who stood facing each other and weeping, with the Great Tree behind them. One was a sorceress, wearing a witch’s hat over her long deep-azure hair, and the other a spell-wielding swordswoman with bright-scarlet locks and a pair of small spectacles.

Am I seeing the past?

Beside me stood two girls in matching white dresses, one with hair of white and azure, the other of black and scarlet.

“My—our—Allen, our one and only key,” they entreated. “Please, please...lock us away.”

I turned the “key,” and all traces of Blazing Qilin vanished.

After that, I remembered supporting an exhausted and unconscious Lydia and issuing instructions to Tina. But just as I was about to address Owain, who had finally made it up onto the roof, my student’s alarmed cry of “Sir!” rang in my ears, and I too released my grip on consciousness.

Epilogue

I awoke to the sight of an unfamiliar ceiling. A small light burned beside my large bed. Outside the window, the sky was dark and the moonlight dim; it looked like rain.

“Oh, you’re awake,” a voice said as I sat up. I had heard more of it than any other in the past four years.

“Lydia,” I replied after a brief pause.

The albatross around my neck was seated in a chair and reading a book. Her scarlet tresses fell past the shoulders of her nightgown. She looked well, although she must have been suffering from fatigue. When she set her book down, I saw that both of our pocket watches also rested on the room’s round table. I spied an envelope beside them. The sender’s name was “Felicia Fosse.”

Lydia proffered me a glass of water, so I accepted it and drank. “How many days have I slept?” I asked once I had drained the refreshing liquid.

“How many do you think?” was her reply.

“About one, I suppose.” After a pause, I shifted to more pressing subjects. “What happened after I passed out? Are you hurt? What about the others?”

“One day?” Lydia repeated, ignoring my questions. She rose to her feet and sat down again on the edge of the bed. There were tears in her eyes, but before I could say anything, she reached out and touched my cheek. Her hand was trembling.

“Three days,” she said. “You wouldn’t open your eyes for three whole days. You had a high fever—it only broke yesterday—and your mana kept getting weaker and weaker... I held your hand, but it was so cold, and I called your name, but...” Her words trailed off into sobs, and tears streamed down her face as she beat my chest with her fists. I wrapped my hands around her back and hugged her.

Once the noblewoman stopped crying, I repeated my questions. “How are you and Tina? Is everyone else all right? What about Owain and his knights?”

“I’m fine,” she replied after a moment’s hesitation. “So is Tiny. The royal guard suffered a lot of casualties, but no deaths. The bodies of William Marshal and his men haven’t turned up. We even managed to heal my stupid brother.”

“And Gerard?”

“He’s not dead.” Lydia buried her face in my chest again.

So, Gerard was beyond recovery. He wouldn’t be forgiven for this latest outrage. It was a miracle that we had even managed to stop him. If Lydia and Tina hadn’t been there...I might have lost them, along with my sister, my students, and my parents. A shiver of fear ran down my spine.

I had made contact with two great spells—Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin—on a profound level and gained a deeper understanding of them. They were indeed the opposite of evil—and they were alive. Blazing Qilin had screamed as Gerard’s incomplete spell formula, augmented by his crude Radiant Shield and Resurrection, had pressed it into his service. Frigid Crane had been unable to ignore that cry and had gone as far as taking control of Tina’s body to rush to her sister’s aid. Both great spells had expended so much power in this conflict that I doubted that either would be able to surface again for some time.

The “key” that they had mentioned...was probably me. And then there was “the Etherheart girl.” I had even more to investigate than before. But for the time being, the young woman who had never left my side and the girl waiting outside the room came first.

“Lydia,” I said, “I’m sorry, but I might get caught up in something even more dangerous soon. When that happens, would you help me? I suppose it would be the reverse of our student days.”

“Don’t act like you even have to ask, you absolute, unbelievable fool!” she snapped. “You’re at my side, and I’m at yours. Nothing will ever change that—I won’t let it!”

I quite agree.

We stared at each other and then nodded. I felt reassured that, together, we had nothing to fear.

“Now, would you call the girl waiting outside for me?” I said.

“You didn’t give me much time to talk,” Lydia replied sullenly. “But all right.”

She ignored my surprise at her lack of resistance as she got off the bed, stretched, and walked over to the door. Before opening it, however, she turned and said, “Oh, I almost forgot. You ought to see this.”

She grinned smugly and held up the back of her right hand for me to see. A mark like a scarlet lion appeared clearly on it before fading away again.

H-Hang on! Sh-She can’t possibly mean what I think she does!

The albatross surveyed my panic with satisfaction and then let out an affected sigh. “Oh, you’ve left your mark on me, and I’m not even married yet. I suppose I’ll have to make you take responsibility.”

“L-Lydia.”

The albatross giggled; that swaying lock of her bangs announced that she was in a singularly good mood. She whistled as she opened the door, and she practically sang as she called, "Tiny! I'll let you take my place for just a little while. You can thank me later."

"B-But I, um..." the young noblewoman stammered, her voice devoid of its usual energy. Like Lydia, she was dressed in her nightgown.

"Tina," I called, beckoning to her, and she approached nervously.

The albatross winked at me and shut the door. She had probably gone to call the other girls.

When Tina reached my side, she closed her eyes as though she couldn't bear to look at me.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," I said, gently stroking her head.

"D-Don't be!" she responded. "I caused you so much trouble..."

Has she lost a little weight?

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm fine. In fact, my magical precision has skyrocketed after, um..." Tina lowered her gaze, a rosy flush in her cheeks.

Oh.

"I'm so sorry," I said, bowing. "The situation demanded haste, but that was no excuse."

"D-Does kissing me require an apology?" she asked hesitantly.

"No, I didn't mean to imply—"

"Liar. I know that I'm still a child in your eyes, sir, but—" Tina squealed as she toppled forward. I tried to steady her but lacked the strength, and she landed in my arms. Her face, beautiful despite her youth, was close to mine. I brushed my fingers through her fine hair.

"S-Sir?"

"You're working harder than I could have imagined, Tina," I said. "I don't know what we would have done without you. Thank you."

"Oh, u-um... Well..." Flustered, she fumbled for a response. "Allen, I... I..." The way she was slowly closing her teary eyes suggested that she had mistaken my meaning.

Just then, the door slammed open to admit three out-of-breath girls in their nightgowns. Ellie, Lynne, and Caren raced over as soon as they caught sight of us and tossed Tina aside. The platinum-haired girl, who still had her eyes closed, let out a bizarre cry as she left my arms.

Once she was out of their way, the trio flung their arms around me, crying "A-Allen, sir!" "Dear brother!" and "Allen!" It was a rambunctious way to greet someone who had just woken up, but I sincerely appreciated it.

Lydia entered shortly after them and mouthed a message: "I'll punish you later."

Have a heart.

The air of my sickroom filled with flowers of ice, crafted with far greater precision than ever before. Tina's face was lowered, her shoulders squared, and her fists clenched. A design of a bird with outspread wings appeared faintly on the back of her right hand.

"Are you all really that anxious to go to war with me?" she said. "All right, then; bring it on!"

Oh dear. That's hardly appropriate language for a duke's daughter.

I recalled something that Lisa had once told me: "talent comes with responsibility." I agreed, but I still wanted to add one word of protest as I surveyed the array of spells being deployed in my sickroom.

"God, this is beyond the pale," I groused. "What have I done to deserve this?!"

✱

"No way," I groaned. "There's just no way..."

I was in my room in the Algren mansion in the eastern capital, reading the detailed military logistical and supply reports that I'd gotten from Old Man Harclay. I couldn't stop myself from shaking.

"Is something the matter, Lord Gil?" a calm voice asked. I looked up to find my maid in menswear standing in the doorway, a tray in her hands.

"K-Konoha," I stuttered. "Wh-What are you doing here? It's pretty late."

"I've brought you coffee," she replied. "Has something in those papers caught your interest?"

"N-Nah... I was just wondering if we could afford to feed the troops a bit better."

"I'm sorry to say it, my lord, but in this house, only you and the Two Wings pay such attention to the rations of the common soldier. The other ducal houses do things differently," she said. "Your coffee."

"Thanks."

I slipped the papers into a drawer, trying to make it look natural. My eye fell on the dagger with the royal crest on it that Old Man Harclay had made me take along with the classified documents.

Those supplies went way beyond what the army needed for maneuvers. The duchy was even secretly importing magical armaments from the Lalannoy Republic. We were obviously gearing up for a war, but we couldn't start one with the Knights of the Holy Spirit.

The old man—Haag Harclay, one of the Algrens' Two Wings and the veteran commander of the Violet Order—had been acting weird when I'd met him in the royal capital. "You remind me of the old duke

in his youth,” he’d told me. “May you uphold the honor of the Algren name.”

He was an old-fashioned knight who loved making things sound serious, but that still hadn’t been quite like him. It almost made me wonder if... No way! That was impossible. Dad would never allow crap like that to go on right under—

“Lord Gil.” The young woman’s cold voice derailed my train of thought. I set down my cup and nervously looked up to find a peaceful smile on her face. “The detachment of knights of the royal guard that suffered so many casualties has begun its return to the royal capital, leaving only a small force behind. It appears that no further measures will be taken until all four dukes have assembled in the capital. His Majesty likely decided that he could not take action while still entertaining multiple envoys from foreign powers.”

“Y-You sure know a lot about what’s going on, Konoha,” I said. “Ever consider going back to work in intelligence?”

“No thank you,” she replied, dismissing my suggestion out of hand. “Given that judgments have been deferred to a later date, the professor and the headmaster of the Royal Academy will likely resume their planned vacations. Her Highness, the Lady of the Sword will do likewise, as will Their Highnesses, Ladies Lynne Leinster and Tina Howard. The Brain of the Lady of the Sword, however, will apparently remain in the eastern capital to recuperate.”

So, Allen’s sticking around, I thought as Konoha continued her report. That’s a relief. I’m glad he made it through in one piece.

Then, it hit me—the maid’s tone had been strangely cold when she mentioned Allen. My bad feeling was getting stronger.

“The empire in the north and the League of Principalities in the south are both conducting major military exercises along our borders, and the Howards and Leinsters are occupied with their responses. In the west, the Lebuferas are staring down the armies of the Dark Lord, as is the main force of the Order of Royal Knights. In other words”—Konoha shot me a piercing stare and her lips twisted in a sneer—“just as planned, in a few days’ time, the only large, well-trained armies capable of immediate mobilization between here and the royal capital will be the forces of the Ducal House of Algren, its retainers, and the Knights of the Holy Spirit.”

“Wh-What?! Wh-Why didn’t you tell me this soon—”

I tried to rise and shout, but the maid’s hand restrained me. There was something wrong with my heartbeat, and sweat was trickling down my forehead.

“I’m telling you now because the time is ripe,” Konoha said. “Definitive proof of Algren support for Prince Gerard is scheduled to fall into the hands of the remaining knights of the royal guard once

their main force, the professor, Lord Rodde, and the Lady of the Sword have departed the eastern capital. Lord Grant will only learn of the delivery after the fact. If word of this were to leak before then”—her fingers brushed my cheek—“the body of your father the duke, already so weakened by poison, might suddenly grow cold.”

I couldn't believe my ears.

“This is not the end,” she added. “It is only the beginning. Plan accordingly.”

“How could you?!” I screamed, grabbing her by the collar as my anger finally burst out. But my shout died not far from my desk—the maid in menswear had silently cast a sound-dampening spell. She then grabbed my right hand and pressed it to her left breast.

Wh-What is this vile mana?!

“I will keep you alive and safe until the curtain falls on this ridiculous farce. That is my reason for living, and I would make myself into a dragon or a devil to achieve it.” She made her confession sound like a prayer. “You must not leave this house until everything is over. After that, my life is yours to take if you wish.”

She meant it. Konoha's determination bordered on madness.

“Wh-Why?” I asked. “How can I be worth all that?”

“You may have forgotten, my lord, but I refuse to let you die in a place like this...even if I must drench this land in blood.”



I stood motionless, stunned by the realization that I'd been placed under house arrest without even knowing it.

I have to do something, but what can I— Of course! Allen's the most trustworthy and dependable guy I know. I'll go straight to him and tell him everything. If I do that, then...then there's still time to—

Darkness flowed in through the window, enveloping Konoha and me; an inky cloud had covered the moon, and the distant thunder was getting closer. It looked like we were in for an unseasonable storm.

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been four months, but I f-finally managed to get volume four out the door. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although I've revised about ninety percent of it. This volume concludes part one of the series, meaning that I've finally managed to finish the introduction. It makes a nice, neat number of volumes, so I'd be really, really grateful if those of you who were drawn in by the cover illustration would pick up the previous books as well. Every volume has wonderful illustrations to enjoy!

So, I'm sure that all of you who have read up to this point have, more than once, found yourselves thinking: "Isn't Lydia a little *too* far ahead of the pack?" Well, you're right; Lydia has known Allen for four years longer than her competition, and that huge advantage has allowed the willful noblewoman to build up an unbeatable lead. But that all ends with this volume. Volumes five and onward are going to shake things up.

Lydia is unbeatable as long as she has Allen at her side. But what will become of her when he's not there? And what about Tina and our other leading ladies? Look forward to finding out in part two, which will start with volume five. Of course, Lady Stella might keep mowing down the competition, and Ellie might snatch the prize out from under everyone's noses.

Now, I have an announcement to make: a-as you might expect from a light novel (*nervous laughter*), *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter* has gotten a manga adaptation drawn by Tamura Muto in the web magazine *Shonen Ace Plus*! It's turning out great, so I heartily recommend you check it out too. I'd never seen rough drafts of a manga before (no surprise there), and I discovered that amazement can draw some weird cries out of people! I hope you'll give it a chance.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. Once again, I'm deeply in your debt this volume, and I look forward to working with you again on volume five and beyond.

The illustrator, cura. Everyone got new outfits for volume four...and they were all absolutely to die for!

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough,

and I'm looking forward to our next meeting. The next volume will be all about Caren; you'll even get a peek at her childhood!

Riku Nanano

The image is a full-page illustration. In the foreground, a young woman with long red hair and a white fox mask is hugging a red dress with white floral patterns. She has a yellow flower in her hair. In the background, a boy in a black coat and a girl in a blue hat are visible. The scene is set outdoors with green trees and a blue sky.

“Mother!
It’s been too
long! How I’ve
missed you!”

Private
Tutor to the
Duke's **4**
Daughter



"There
are so many
beastfolk
people and so
many stalls."

"Mmm...
So sweet..."

"Let's stop by
that place too."

Tina's personal maid

Elfie

Tina's naturally clumsy maid is the granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants of the House of Howard. Elfie's talents blossomed while she attended Allen's lessons alongside her mistress. She attends the Royal Academy with him and Lynne and acts as a mediator between the two fractious young nobleswomen.

Duke Howard's
second daughter

Tina

Despite being born into the Ducal House of Howard, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen's tutelage. She placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams.

Duke Leinster's
second daughter

Lynne

A prodigy who has learned to cast the supreme fire spell Firebird—albeit imperfectly—and learned both magic and swordplay from her elder sister, Lydia. Lynne idolizes Lydia and Allen, and placed second on the entrance exam of the Royal Academy, their alma mater.

“In your
dreams, maybe!
I’ll protect
my brother!”

“Tee hee hee.
You don’t deal well
with this sort of
thing, do you?
Now, praise me!
Don’t be shy!”

Royal Academy
student council vice president

Caren

Allen’s younger sister by adoption is a member of the wolf clan minority and a model student who achieved her position as student council vice president purely on her own merits and despite lingering racial prejudice. Caren acts as a dependable big sister to the younger girls, but she also has a needy side that she shows around Allen.

Duke Leinster’s
eldest daughter

Lydia

The Lady of the Sword has been the albatross around Allen’s neck ever since they both enrolled in the Royal Academy. Lydia is brilliant, gorgeous, and the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman. Recent events led to her promotion from court sorceress to the princess’s personal guard. She has a free-wheeling personality but displays a jealous side when it comes to Allen.



At my third cry, she gave a start
and then slowly raised her head to look at me.
Her eyes were red with weeping, and the large tears
that fell from them froze before
they struck the ground.

“S-Sir, I’m
s-so sorry...
Y-You got hurt
because of—”

“Tina!”

Private tutor
to the dukes’ daughters

Allen

A young man who fails to appreciate
his own unrivaled control of magic.
Allen and Lydia go way back.
After helping the magically impaired
Tina to rapidly realize her ability,
he now serves as a private tutor to
four girls, including Lynne and Stella.



Private Tutor to the
Duke's Daughter

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“Why,
oh *why* aren't
you looking at
me? You must
have a guilty
conscience!”



Daughter of the
Fosse Company's president

Felicia

Stella and Caren's best friend, who took a long absence from the Royal Academy due to illness. Felicia is extremely shy and also nervous around men outside her immediate social circle (except for Allen).

After her business acumen caught Allen's eye, she withdrew from the Royal Academy to work at a new business founded by the Ducal Houses of Howard and Leinster.

4

Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Saving the Kingdom
over Summer Break with
Ladies of Ice and Fire





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It’s been too
long! How I’ve
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Private
Tutor to the
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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 4
by Riku Nanano

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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